

STORY ■
SHIROW SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

2

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!



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WOMEN'S KING:

RYOU
TSUKIYOMIZAKA

QUEEN, WOMEN'S THRONE:

GINKO
SORA

SHOWDOWN FOR THE WOMEN'S CROWN!!

MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU:
Ryuo. Once lost a match out of embarrassment when his opponent pointed out the hair sticking out of his nose.



AI HINATSURU:
Yaichi's apprentice. Elementary school fourth grader. Yaichi nearly renounced her for putting hot sauce on fried potatoes the other day.



GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's "Big Sister" in Shogi terms. Holds two titles: Queen and Women's Throne. Can dance through three songs on the radio.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Yaichi and Ginko's Master's daughter. Did very well as a soccer player in high school.



MIO MIZUKOSHI:
Ai's Shogi friend. Elementary school fourth grader. Brags about riding her bike all the way around Lake Biwa last summer.



AYANO SADATOU:
Ai's Shogi friend. Elementary school fourth grader. Acts grown up, but wets her bed after eating watermelon.



CHARLETTE ISOIR:
Ai's Shogi friend. Six years old. French, but always eats natto for breakfast.



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VOLUME 2

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork, and all illustrations

Shirabii

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▲ PROLOGUE

Amateur Meijin.

Out of all the titles that amateur Shogi players can receive, this is the most prestigious.

People who earn this crowning title receive all sorts of honors, but a *match* is the most valuable of all.

A chance to play against a god—a commemorative match against the pro Meijin, the one who stands at the pinnacle of professional Shogi.

The Meijin plays without a Bishop, but of course, this isn't just an ordinary game.

The commemorative match that year took place in Kansai.

The professional Meijin arrived at the Kansai Shogi Association's holiest of arenas, the *Onjyoudan no Ma*, fully dressed in traditional Japanese clothes normally worn for title matches.

The amateur Meijin arrived at the professional arena one hour in advance and sat next to the Shogi board to adjust to his surroundings before the match got underway. It was all part of his plan. His opponent may have been a professional Shogi player, but losing with a Bishop handicap would be embarrassing beyond measure. The man's desire to win radiated from his very being.

With a young member of the Sub League taking a seat next to the board to fulfill his duty as the recordkeeper, the same Professional League match procedures were followed as the match got underway.

The amateur Meijin was perfect in the early game. Using his one-piece advantage at every turn, he followed his research to the letter into the mid-

game.

He even rode the waves of battle, maintaining his lead all the way into the late game. His well orchestrated all-out offensive was designed to end the match in a furious burst that wouldn't allow the pro Meijin to unleash his full potential.

Then, the Meijin attacked with a Knight from a completely unexpected angle.

That one move turned the match on its head.

"It couldn't be?"

The amateur Meijin groaned after mulling over the situation for exactly fifteen minutes.

The more he read the board, the more he came to realize that he had no chance to win the match despite having the upper hand until that very moment. He had been out read, plain and simple.

The man's head, hovering over the board, fell with a deflated *flop*.

"..... There's nothing left. I have lost."

The man made a few moves to set the scene before surrendering. Knowing that he left a beautiful record behind made more of a lasting impression than the agony of defeat. Everyone who played against the Meijin felt the same way after a match.

"You nearly had me," the pro Meijin said with a smile. While he admitted that the advance nearly reached him, he spoke with the brimming confidence that came from perfectly predicting the attack.

The two players conducted their own review session and exchanged ideas in the few minutes before reporters, cameramen and the like were allowed into the arena.

Early game, mid-game and the late game With each revealing how they read the board and comparing their strategies, the two were engrossed in their

own world of discovery.

“Marvelous,” the pro Meijin said with admiration.

He emerged victorious, but the man’s reading skills were so precise he could hardly believe his opponent was an amateur. To the point that he felt it was a waste for him to stay that way

“I would be more than happy to take you as an apprentice should you ever consider testing into the Sub League.”

“Thank you so much for the offer. But my daughter is very young”

He had no intention of turning professional. The man said so himself.

He may be on top of the amateur world, but still lost to the top professional with the Bishop handicap. Even if he were to try to join the professional ranks, his limit was in plain sight. Reason being, he had been overwhelmed by the Meijin sitting in front of him even though he was *more than a Bishop ahead*

He couldn’t chase the elusive dream of professional Shogi because he had to support his wife and young daughter. And even if he succeeded, he could see just how far his talent could take him.

“But, should my daughter be interested in becoming a Shogi player when she gets older, then——.”

RECORD 1

A i H i n a t s u r u

ひな 雛
つ 鶴
あ い

SCHOOL: OSAKA CITY NORTH FUKUSHIMA PUBLIC
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CLASS: 4-2

**FAVORITE
SUBJECTS:** MATH, SOCIAL STUDIES

**LEAST FAVORITE
SUBJECT:** P.E. (ESPECIALLY THE MONKEY BARS!)



🏠 LIVING IN THE KUZURYU SHOGI FAMILY TREE

My apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru, and I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, start every day with Shogi puzzles.

“Ai. Are you ready?”

“Y-Yes!”

One book of Shogi puzzles is laying on the *tatami* mat.

The two of us are sitting side by side in front of it.

My grade school age apprentice is leaning forward with her hands on the mat in front of her, tiny body rocking back and forth as if psyching herself up for battle.

I pinch the corner of the book cover between my thumb and forefinger——.

“Okay? Ready Go!!”

I flip the book open like a gunman whipping out a pistol.

The first puzzle looks like it came right out of a match. It’s a late-game scenario that could show up in any match.

I’d be embarrassed to call myself a pro if my apprentice solves this one first. It only took me a glance to figure it out.

“I got it! From 3 One Bishop to 2 Five Gold, fifteen moves to checkmate! Next!”

“Yes!!”

The first point is mine. I turn the page. The next puzzle is *kyokuzume*, where the Rook, King and Bishop are all in a diagonal line.

This situation would never happen in a match but——.

“Oh, I know! From 5 Six Gold to 2 Two Rook. Nineteen moves to checkmate! I

think!!”

“Gah Next!”

Competing with my apprentice like this is a recent development.

Ai was always looking over the other side whenever I tried solving a Shogi puzzle, muttering “Ah!” and “Owwh!” to herself the entire time. She obviously worked them out before I did. Looking at them upside down too.

So, I forget exactly when we started sitting next to each other and solving puzzles together, but it developed into a competition to see who could solve them first like right now.

You may be thinking: what’s the Ryuo, a person at the pinnacle of the Shogi world, doing competing against a fourth grader? But you have to remember, this elementary school girl is a miracle child, a god in human form. Judging her by mortal standards is pointless.

The two of us are neck and neck after solving ten puzzles.

“All right! Last one! Here we go!!”

“Yes!”

Turn the page and—— Whoa! What the heck is this?!

“It’s just a simple *nyugyoku* type, right? I’ve got a Rook, a Silver and a Promoted Pawn to attack with, and the Bishop and another Gold in the waiting area Looks like this will be over real quick. Hmm? That’s different

“..... Here, here, here Herehereherehereherehere——.”

Crap. Ai’s engine kicked into high gear. Got to hurry.

There aren’t too many options for the first move, so if I start with *the least likely*——.

“I solved it! Move 3 Eight Silver, take it away and place Gold behind the King, and the Bishop in the ninth column to protect against the other Bishop, move

the King to 2 Eight to take the Gold and 3 Eight Knight——.”

“That’s *uchifu*.”

“Oh no?!”

“I got it! Rather than 3 Eight Knight, 4 Nine Knight to 2 Eight Knight. Twenty-three moves to checkmate!!”

“Gah, rats. That’s right, *uchifu*

The way my solution was going, I’d need to put the King in checkmate with the Pawn in my waiting area, a move known as *uchifutsume*.

But that would break the rules, just like having two Pawns in the same vertical column, called *nifu*.

“Haaa, I knew that the 4 Nine Silver would get in the way from the start, but to think the Pawn that blocked it would get in my way at the end

“Dodging traps feels great ≡”

“It’s amazing the author brought this scenario to life with only six pieces considering you need to block opposing pieces twice as well as how they resolve to sacrifice the Knight to make it all work. Haaaa

I can only sigh and marvel at this point. Sure, losing to my apprentice hurts but it’s all thanks to her I found this wonderful Shogi puzzle at all. Thank you!

Ai looks just as happy, walking on cloud nine with that last one solved.

“Doing puzzles like that one makes me want to make my own

“I know what you mean.”

Shogi puzzles are an art form.

There’s so much more to them than regular puzzles. The first step is figuring out what the author had in mind (their intention), and then resolving the rest

gives you the same rush and satisfaction as reading a good novel.

“But I can’t recommend making puzzles as part of your training.”

“Why not? Solving them is just fine

“Once you start making one, all the time in the world won’t be enough.”

They can be solved in a flash. But making them takes a long, long time.

It’s not all that strange for one to take about ten years to make, and some of them required thirty or some unbelievable number of years to complete. And making one won’t even net the author a single yen.

I’ve heard many stories about Shogi puzzle authors who spent so much time on it that they grew old, their wives divorced them, they lost custody of their children, bankrupted their businesses and ended up having their lives in checkmate rather than the opposing King in the puzzle. It just ain’t worth it.

“Plus, there doesn’t seem to be a connection between the ability to create Shogi puzzles and being good at playing actual Shogi.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Have you ever seen a match end as cleanly and poetically as a puzzle solution?”

“Umm Nope (>-<)”

The more moves required, the more artistic the puzzle is, the further from reality it gets. Kind of like a fantasy novel.

But that’s exactly why they’re so darn interesting.

“Just look at the *nyugyoku* puzzle we just did. If the King reaches the ninth row in a match—the deepest row in enemy territory, it’s nearly impossible to put in checkmate. And I’ve heard that most of the famous Shogi puzzle authors are only about as good as amateur 1-*dan* players.”

“But they can make puzzles like that?!”

Solving puzzles and playing Shogi are completely different. There are many top pros that don't include Shogi puzzles in their training regimen because "real checkmates aren't that clean."

In that case, what's the best way to practice and how much? I have no clue.

Studying the ins and outs of Shogi more than anyone else doesn't mean you'll be better than everyone else.

The Shogi path is unforgiving. There's so much we still don't know.

"Listen Ai. It's not about simply solving all the Shogi puzzles you can and playing as many practice games as time allows, but finding the right balance that's most effective for you. Always keep that in mind."

"Master, Master! This one is really interesting!"

"I told you to listen, didn't I Ohh? A Defenseless King?"

It's a type of puzzle where the King doesn't have a single piece defending it.

Sure, it looks simple enough, but it's already in enemy territory like the last puzzle. So it's really difficult to force checkmate.

Let's see First, place the Rook at 2 Eight—.

"It's fifty-nine moves until the Gold reaches 2 Four. The sequence starting on move thirty-six, moving the Pawn all the way to 2 Four Rook on thirty-nine, is particularly satisfying."

"You're amazing, Master! That took you what, two seconds?!"

"I'm a bit peeved you didn't wait for me to start solving it"

"Tee-hehe≡"

Ai sticks her tongue out at me. Damn cute. Makes me want to give her a treat for no reason at all.

"I see this author's name all the time How do you read those characters? *Gekkou*?"

“That’s the chairman.”

“Who?”

“The chairman. Seiichi Tsukimitsu.”

“..... Chairman?”

“Chairman of the Japan Shogi Association. He’s at the top of all pro Shogi players. You know, the 17th Meijin?”

“S-Sorry I, um, don’t know many pro players other than you, Master”

Ai started playing Shogi only four months ago.

And it was seeing my match that got her into it in the first place. She spent three months doing the Shogi puzzles and playing over the Internet after that, so she taught herself how to play. Her talent is astounding and her skills are on the rise, but she is still just a beginner. I’ve got a lot to teach her.

“So, Master, what’s the plan for today? A practice group? Or are you going to go out somewhere?”

“I’ve got work to do. And you’re coming with me, Ai.”

“Work? But it’s Saturday, a stay home day And I’m coming with you? What kind of work is it?”

I answer my apprentice’s question as I pull a suit out of my closet.

“A lesson.”

KOBE

“Oh wow! So this is Kobe?!”

Kobe, Sannomiya.

Surprised by all the people once we got off the train, Ai looks up at me with

twinkling eyes. She's acting like a kid on a field trip.

"It's so close to Osaka! The trip didn't take any time at all!!"

"Because it's just a twenty-minute ride on an express train from Osaka Station."

Since the association headquarters and my apartment are just outside Fukushima Station, one stop away from Osaka on the Kanjou Line, the whole trip only takes about thirty minutes once you factor in the time it takes to change trains. The association's location is fantastic.

"Ai. Your hand."

"Y-Yes!!"

I take her hand once we're through the turnstile. Ai only just moved here from the north coast. Getting separated would be bad.

"I know it's a bit embarrassing, but deal with it, okay?"

"I promise I'll never let go!!! Never, ever again!!!!"

"N-never?"

That would be a problem

"Look! Look, Master! There's people and stores all over the place!"

"Kobe is always like this on weekends. There are a few European-style buildings a short walk from here, modern temples and Chinatown in Nankinmachi too."

"European-style! Chinatown!"

This part of the city, Sannomiya, is particularly busy because there are so many popular tourist spots—meaning it's really crowded. Doesn't help that spring is peak tourist season.

Even among this throng of humanity, Ai stands out like a sore thumb.

She's squeezing the daylights out of my hand with one of hers and holding up a *shingen-bukuro* (a small purse that matches traditional Japanese clothing, just big enough to hold a fan—Shogi players use them during title matches because they're so convenient) with the other hand. People walking by us are rubbernecking for a closer look.

First off, she's very cute. That's all it takes to overwhelm other people.

Add in Ai's innocent and naïve personality, and everything she does makes people want to shower her with affection like a puppy.

That slight lisp in her voice. Her expression changes in the blink of an eye. She's cute no matter what she does.

"..... Crazy. This is so crazy I can't resist"

"Huh? Master? What's so crazy?"

"Uh, um"

Crap. I got so caught up in how damn cute my apprentice is that I forgot about work and took her sightseeing. We even stopped at a café that I hadn't planned on while I was off in la la land, and now we're eating cake

"Oh! It's the cake, right?! It is crazy good!!"

"Yeah That's exactly what I meant"

"Haa Being with you, drinking tea in Kobe. It's like a dream! I'm so happy≡"

Also, the fact that she doesn't realize just how cute she is makes it all the more difficult to defend against it. It's the Defenseless King. Everything gets washed away by that cuteness. Nothing is more vulnerable than this.

"..... Ai. Can you listen for a second?"

"Oh! Master. You've got some frosting on your cheek."

"Huh? Where?"

“Here!”



The fourth grader leans over the table, reaches out toward her Master and scoops the bit of whipped cream off his cheek before sticking it in her mouth.

“He-he ≡”

She smiles like she’s having the time of her life. Is she trying to kill me?!

P-Please, I’m begging you, you’re a sitting duck like this

I will my weakening spine to wake the hell up and teach my apprentice a thing or two about city life.

“..... Are you listening, Ai? Bad people tend to gather in crowded places like this in Osaka and Kobe. Cute little girls like you, Ai, are easy targets. Never come to these places unless Keika or I are with you, okay?”

“Sorry, Master. I couldn’t really hear you. Can you say that again?”

“Like I said, cute girls like you are easy targets for bad people, so you need to keep your eyes open——.”

“E-he≡ E-heh-heh≡.”

For some reason, my apprentice happily puffs out her cheeks as I’m trying to warn her. So damn cute.

“Listen you Something bad is going to happen if you don’t take me seriously. Cities are dangerous places, so you always need to be careful.”

“Ookay!”

At least I got that answer out of her, but she’s frolicking her way to my side of the table with that poufy smile of hers still on her face. Her cuteness is overflowing. For the love of all that’s sacred, make it stop!!

A lot of people that play Shogi aren’t interested in much else, my apprentice included. Actually, Shogi is about the only thing they’re interested in.

“Big Sis had quite a few problems herself——.”

“!!”

A jolt ran down Ai’s body at the mere mention of Big Sis.

My elder “sister” apprentice, the two-title holder Ginko Sora, stands out of the crowd like you wouldn’t believe.

Not only do her silver hair and white skin turn her into a beacon in the sunlight, her perfectly balanced face makes her look like a fairy or something. More guys have hit on her than I can count and she’s had a few stalkers too. They always seem to mistake me for her boyfriend whenever that happens, causing me a lot of pain. But really, I don’t know how much of this I can take.

“..... Master.”

“Yeah?”

“Me and that girl Which one is higher?”

Higher?

As in which one of the two of you stands out more?

“That’d be Big Sis of course. Her looks make hearts skip a beat and her face is pretty much everywhere. Only natural: she’s Naniwa’s Snow White after all.”

“..... Master *darabuchi*.”

Ai’s piping mad. I don’t blame her, bringing up the opponent that has driven her to tears in Practice League matches. Must’ve been too much for her.

Having a higher-ranking rival in the same Master/apprentice line has triggered her competitive spirit. It happens even when not playing Shogi.

That competitive spirit That’s what I like to see!

But please, leave me out of your fights, okay!!

“So then, Master. You said we had work today? Was it to explore Kobe?”

“Of course not We have a lesson. A lesson, got that?”

I let out a long sigh, take a swig of coffee and explain what pro Shogi players do for work.

“We basically do two kinds of jobs, *matches* and *promotion*. Matches are playing Shogi. Promotion is meant to introduce people to the game, like being a judge at Shogi tournaments, giving instructional lessons at regional events and doing commentary on TV shows or signing autographs What I’m saying is that there’s a lot to do for promotion besides playing Shogi, but the most important one is instructional matches. To put it another way: teaching amateurs how to play.”

“And those are lessons?”

“Yeah. We’re here today to give someone that lives close by a lesson. Someone who’s helped me out a lot over the years requested one.”

I did not come here to give a grade schooler the Kobe grand tour.

“That’s big for Sub League members whose main sources of income are recording Shogi matches and giving lessons. Part-time jobs aren’t allowed, strictly speaking. It’s a great source of income for people from the middle of nowhere like me——.”

“Money?”

Ai freezes like a statue.

“Um People pay money to learn how to play Shogi?”

“Of course. Professionals get money for doing a job. That’s what *pro* means.”

“.....”

Clatter! The fork in Ai’s hand falls to the table.

Then, shaking, Ai says——.

“I I I”

“What’s wrong?”

“I haven’t paid Master any money!!” Ai yells in the middle of the café, her face pale as a ghost. Right in the middle of all these tourists.

Everyone in here is looking at us with shock in their eyes.

And they seem really interested in the two of us Maybe suspicious would be a better word.

Crap. I’m sweating buckets.

“No Ai. Don’t worry about that. Money isn’t a problem.”

“B-But! Master has been teaching me everything there is to know! Like how to do this, and the way to do that”

People around us are whispering to each other.

“Everything there is to know?!”

“But she’s still so young”

“Shouldn’t somebody report this to the police?”

Crap, crap, crap!

“And me living with you costs money, doesn’t it?! I, I’m living in Master’s room! The two of us are living together!!”

“J-Just calm down, okay? Don’t be so loud, alright?”

They’ll call the police yeah?

“Ghaa?! B-But what can I do?! How, how can I make the money to pay you?”

“No, wait. Would you listen to me?”

“I, I guess I have to pay with my body!”

“That was on purpose?! You’re trying to give people the wrong idea, aren’t you?!”

I pull the trembling grade schooler, fumbling with the hem of her skirt, away

from the table, pay the bill and take her outside.

Then I explained to her as calmly as possible.

“..... See here. Shogi players don’t take money from apprentices. Not usually, anyway.”

“They don’t?! W-Why not?”

“No parent would ever take money from their own kids, right? It’s the same way with apprentices. So, you don’t need to worry about money, Ai.”

Students that come to a Shogi classroom to learn how to play and *apprentices* that want to become professionals are treated very differently.

The entire Shogi world considers apprentices that commit themselves entirely to the game to be their own children.

That’s exactly why only children with enough skill get taken as apprentices.

“Also, your parents are sending me money every month. Your allowance comes right out of that.”

“..... It does?”

“It pays for any clothes and any whatnots you need too.”

It’s true that I’m getting money from Ai’s parents.

I told them not to worry about it, but they wouldn’t take no for an answer. “*At least let us pay for everyday expenses!*” It would be rude to reject that kind of offer.

So, I did give in, but I’m putting all of it into a savings account for Ai.

She can use it to buy a really nice kimono to wear for her first title match in the Women’s League. A professional good enough to compete for multiple titles can never have enough kimonos.

And I will see to it that Ai becomes that kind of professional.

“Just make sure to say thank you over the phone next time you talk to your parents, okay?”

“I will!”

“Oh, man We’ve wasted so much time on this nonsense. Hurry up!”

“Right behind you, Master!!”

After taking her hand again so we don’t get separated, Ai and I took off at a sprint.

MANSION

“Oh, wow, wow This mansion is huge”

“He said he had one of the old European-style mansions near the port moved out here.”

Made from bricks, it sits on a hill overlooking the town, which is filled with unique Western buildings.

You can see all the way out over Kobe to the ocean from the front door. Can’t beat this view.

“That being said, he’s made quite a few changes. Installing a *tatami* room for Shogi matches is a given, but he also turned the roof into a beer garden.”

“Beer garden!!”

She sounds surprised, like she doesn’t completely understand But, growing up at an inn with a hot spring, I’m pretty sure she gets the gist.

“So, who lives in this place?”

“A novelist.”

“Really?! Master, I’ve never met an author before!”

“Is-Is that right?”

“What kind of books does he write?”

“..... Romance novels, I guess For adults”

“How wonderful!!”

“.....”

I really don't know how to describe the master of this house to my sparkly eyed apprentice.

His name is Dan Onizaka.

The romantic novels he writes are bestsellers in the sensual novel genre.

His most famous work is called *Net and Meat*.

As for the content, I'd like to avoid going into too much detail, but I think you'd understand what a book with a beautiful woman strung up like a slab of meat on the cover would be about.

To be blunt—he's a master S & M novelist.

“Well, he used to be a grade school teacher, but apparently he would turn his classes into a study hall so he could write”

“Wow!”

To think he was writing S & M. That little anecdote became legendary.

“But, Master. Why do you know an author who lives in a big mansion like this?”

“Onizaka-sensei is a Shogi enthusiast and, as I said before, he helped me out a lot when I was in the Sub League.”

We call people who are particularly fond of games like Shogi and Go *enthusiasts*. Once they find a favorite player, they take his or her lessons as a way to support them.

In sumo wrestling terms: *tanimachi*. They're patrons. Apparently, Ai's grandfather was like that as well.

"He's been supporting me like a benefactor since I first started learning under Master Kiyotaki. He heard that I took an apprentice and said he'd be delighted to meet you."

"Meet me?"

"Yeah. So, you're the one taking center stage today, not me."

"I am?!"

"Your first job."

Gently teasing my surprised apprentice, we step through the front gate.

Honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about bringing an elementary school girl inside this mansion owned by a man who writes scandalous novels Well, probably safer than someone who writes light novels. All those guys have Lolita complexes.

Onizaka-*sensei* prefers mature women, most of his heroines are widows and he comes off as a normal friendly geezer despite writing what he does, I reassure myself as I open the front door and Right there in the entrance way!!

"Master! Look at that wooden horsey!"

Ai immediately spots the triangular torture device with a horse's head on the front and jumps for joy. I'm on the verge of panic.

"Oooh! There's a whip on the wall over here! Oh, wow! It's so thick! Hey, hey, Master. We can pretend we're cowboys!"

".....Yes, we could."

"Huh, what's this, Master? It's all bumpy. And there's something weird sticking up at the bottom. What is this?"

“L-Let’s go to the back room! It’d be rude to keep Onizaka-*sensei* waiting! Okay?!”

“Oh-oh! M-Master! This thing dances when you press the button?!”

“Just get moving!!”

I take the dancing bumpy thing from Ai’s hand and chuck it far out of sight before the two of us follow a red carpet to a room at the back of the mansion.

Then I scream at the grinning geezer sitting in the corner, “Onizaka-*sensei*! What was all that?!”

“All that? How do you mean?”

“The wooden horse, the whip, that bumpy thing! Why did you put all of that in the front hallway?!”

“I did a little redecorating.”

“When?!”

“This morning.”

“You did that on purpose?!”

Perverted geezer! Lining up all that stuff for an elementary schooler?!

“Master? Is there something wrong with putting the horsey in the front hallway?”

“You should never leave toys around!!”

“I thought a kiddo would get a kick out of them.”

Oh, she got a kick out of them all right! That’s the problem!

“Oh, okay, that’s enough chitchat. I’m itching for a game.”

“.....”

Onizaka-*sensei* cheerfully starts setting up a Shogi board. I can’t stay mad at him, not after seeing his innocent side. I turn to face my patiently waiting

apprentice to address her.

“..... Ai. You remember what I taught you, right?”

“Y-Yes!”

Once she takes a fan out of her purse, Ai sets it down in front of her knees and bows as low as she can with both hands on the *tatami* mat. Then, she introduces herself.

“I’m Ai Hinatsuru, a member of the Kansai Shogi Association and the Kuzuryu Shogi family tree. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

“So, you’re Ai, eh?”

Onizaka-sensei’s gaze falls tenderly on Ai as my apprentice introduces herself without stuttering. I swear, that’s the face of an old man about to give his granddaughter some money.

“All right then. Shall we start without a handicap?”

“Sure! Ready when you are!!”

“You got spunk, kiddo,” said *Sensei*, narrowing his eyes as he made his first move. Seriously, any kid would be happy to call him grandpa when he’s like this. How could anyone so warm and friendly write perverted novels? Weird.

By the way, Onizaki-sensei is amateur 4-dan At least on paper. I’d say he is actually closer to 2-dan.

This disparity is because of his services to the association—he donates so much money to help promote the game that they decided to promote him as a thank you. Doing that for famous people is an important part of the association’s diplomacy.

On the other hand, Ai is a genuine amateur 4-dan.

She can hold her ground against 5-dan players now. People that hold amateur 5-dan are in a class strong enough to represent entire prefectures in

tournaments. Since most of her experience has come from Shogi puzzles and playing against people on the Internet, Ai doesn't know how to read between the lines during a match, let alone hold back.

That's why she put Onizaka-*sensei* in checkmate with ease.

"Whew, you're good! I don't stand a chance without a handicap."

Even after losing, *Sensei* chuckles and says, "One more! Can I ask you to take away your Bishop?"

"S-Sure! Ready when you are!!"

A new match was underway as soon as the pieces were set in place. However, Ai doesn't have the Bishop in her ranks this time.

And not having a Bishop affects a lot more on the board than just being one big piece down.

".....?!"

Ai had to catch her breath as Onizaka-*sensei* advances much faster than before. A smirk crawls across his lips, curling deeper than I ever thought possible.

"Surprised, are you? I'm pretty good at playing with a handicap."

Onizaka-*sensei* has been playing against pro players and Support League members for decades.

In other words, he's played hundreds of matches as the *shita-te*, the lower player.

Therefore, he has far more experience playing with a handicap than in even matches, against the best and brightest of the Shogi world no less. No one is better at playing as a lower player than him. Every single pro and Women's League player Onizaka-*sensei* has helped out over the years, including Big Sis and myself, have suffered at the hands of this hypocritical geezer in handicap matches.

I can't remember who it was, but they gave him the perfect alias—*Uwate-Killing Demon*.

"So, what'd you think? Can't overlook my style, now can you?"

"Keh!"

"Then again, being good with a handicap is nothing to hang your hat on."

This match turned into a heated battle mostly because Ai isn't used to being the *uwa-te* or upper player. Her not wanting to lose in front of her master is only compounding the pressure, I'm sure.

Was this too much?

But she'll be playing more matches as the upper player as she climbs up the Practice League ranks. It'd be better to have her go through baptism of fire here and now.

With those thoughts in my head and my eyes glued to the board, someone else comes into the room and takes a seat next to me.

"I will be observing for a while."

"Ah, sure"

I nod without even thinking.

It's a man about Onizaka-sensei's age dressed in traditional Japanese clothing.

While not very tall, he's distinguished. Being this close, I can almost feel his presence on my skin. He's got an air that only a man who's been through many trials and tribulations could possess ... There's no doubt in my mind he's spent most of his life competing. Strange people who don't identify themselves pass through Onizaka-sensei's mansion all the time. Maybe he plays *Go*? I doubt anyone that plays mahjong or chess would dress like that

I wanted to ask, but I restrained myself because it's rude to start a conversation next to the board in the middle of a match.

“Now, now. With this many pieces on my side, that King should be as good as mine

The late game has arrived and Onizaka-*sensei* is in the lead.

Ai’s defenses have been decimated, and now her only hope of victory is to advance her King into enemy territory. However, that’s going to be extremely difficult. One slightly wrong move and this match’ll be over on the spot—.

“..... Here, here, here, herehereherehereherehere Yes!!”

Ai confidently advances her King with a path in mind.

Once she safely advanced across the board, she promptly put the lower player’s King into checkmate.

“Woah You’re good! Really good!”

Onizaka-*sensei* tosses some of his captured pieces onto the board to signal his surrender. He’s got a smile on his face, but I’m sure losing in that fashion has him burning up inside.

“You’re a head above the rest once the pieces start clashing. Never thought I’d lose from that position. I’m stunned

“Uh, umm If you had moved to this piece here, I would have lost

“..... You’re a nice kiddo, Ai.”

The elderly gentleman next to me and I watch them start a review session for a moment before he strikes up a conversation in a quiet voice.

“For one so young, a girl even, to defeat a grown man benefiting from a handicap Mr. Onizaka informed that me a talented child was coming today, but I had no idea she’d be this good.”

“That’s because she is talented.”

“Doesn’t having that talent at your mercy frighten you?”

“Very much so. Yes.”

My body leans in by itself as I agree with every word he says.

“I’m always worried that I might do something that slows down her progress or wastes her talent. I’m constantly wondering if there’s a better way to teach her.”

“However I do believe you possess the same talent as she. Why not raise her the same way you developed your own talent?”

“Everything would be so much easier if that were the case”

I massage my forehead and reveal what’s been tormenting me. I could never say this stuff to someone in the Shogi world. After all, there are things you can only say to people you don’t know.

“There are many different ways to improve. There’s no guarantee that studying Shogi as much as you can will bear fruit.”

“You don’t say”

“But, you’ll never get better without studying. In that case, you’ve got to find the right amount of studying for you personally, but everyone is different. In the end, I think that only the players who figure out what works for them will rise to the top of the Shogi world. That’s what makes teaching so difficult. She might regress because of how I teach.”

“Is that so?”

“But I don’t have an answer. I’m not cut out to be a Master”

“Your concern shows that you care.”

“But I have to produce results. It’s that kind of world.”

“Is it now?”

The elderly gentleman folds his arms across his chest and looks to the floor, deep in thought.

“.....To consider such details while still so young Now I understand why

that honorable man was so insistent

“What?”

“I have witnessed something wonderful today. Now, I shall take my leave——.”

With those few words, the elderly gentleman left the room.

His farewell was so smooth that I lost my chance to ask him his name.

▲ RIVAL

Ai left to use the facilities, so I used the opportunity to talk with Onizaka-sensei.

“So, what did you think? How is Ai?”

“I think she’s got game sense. Maybe better than little miss Ginko.”

“Better than Big Sis?! D-Don’t you think that’s a little much”

My elder “sister” apprentice, Ginko Sora holds two women’s titles, Queen and Women’s Throne, while holding a 2-dan ranking in the Sub League. She’s the best woman in the history of Shogi.

She herself may be a bit peeved that her flawless victory record earned her the alias Naniwa’s Snow White, but to think that Ai could be even more talented than her

“Yeah, but she’ll never overtake Miss Ginko at this rate.”

“Come again? Why is that?”

“Cause she doesn’t have a rival.”

Onizaka-sensei declares.

“That’s how it is everywhere. No one ever got good on their own. Shogi is a

game for two after all. It's that competition that drives people past their limits for the first time."

—Competition.

I couldn't help but feel that he brought up something extremely important that I didn't even notice.

"It's important to have fun. You know what they say: 'enjoyment is the best talent.' But talent won't make you good. It's the desire to *get stronger* that brings out potential. And it's that desire that makes you feel *threatened* when a rival might surpass you."

"Feel threatened?"

"There aren't any kiddos Ai's age in Kanto or Kansai at the moment that can challenge her. But little Miss Ginko was lucky enough to have someone."

"But, Big Sis has no rivals. Even her *enemies* in the Women's League can't—."

"Not a lady. You."

"Me?"

"Very much so. Back when the two of you were runts You still are runts in my eyes, but that's beside the point Back when you were Ai's age, little Miss Ginko and yourself competed all the time and got better, no? I remember it like it was yesterday. The two of you sitting across the board from each other in this very house, driving each other to tears and fighting with everything you had. Those were the days."

Sensei glances around the room as if taking a trip down memory lane.

"Little Miss Ginko has only ever had one goal, Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu."

His face turns serious.

"Everything that she's doing to become a pro isn't because she wanted titles

or to be the first in history. It's to fight you on an even field. That's why she's chosen to follow the most difficult path."

It's true, I was the first to enter the purgatory known as the Sub League. Big Sis tested in a year later.

I pretty much followed a set path, entering the Sub League because I wanted to be like my Master, but Big Sis had the option of going into the Women's League after the Practice League. All this time I thought that she joined the Sub League simply because Master recognized that she had enough talent to become a professional Shogi player.

Never once did it cross my mind that I might have influenced her decision

"But Ai though, she's just a fledgling that idolizes you, toddling along in your footsteps. There's no competition. That's why she'll never surpass little Miss Ginko the way things are now."

"....."

"There's nothing wrong with doting on an apprentice. Teaching all the ins and outs is how Masters show they care. But Masters also show their affection by throwing their apprentices into the fire."

As someone who's been involved in the Shogi world for so many years, Onizaka-sensei's words carry a lot of weight.

I was very moved by his speech, but

"Master, Master! There was a broken necklace on the bathroom floor!"

That feeling instantly disappeared the moment I saw my apprentice come back holding a broken *necklace* with a golf ball-sized, white pendant in the middle. I snatch it out of her hands and hurl it straight at the perverted geezer.

"So how was it? Playing against Onizaka-sensei?"

"He's really good with an advantage!"

By then it was long past time to go.

Later Ai's competitive juices were still flowing, even after we left the mansion and made our way back to the train station. Her cheeks are still red from a match.

Now that I think about it, I don't think she's been that into a match since she came to Osaka.

But then again, it wasn't anywhere near as intense as her match against Big Sis for the Practice League entrance test. Meanwhile, Onizaka-sensei's words are stuck in my head like mud that just won't go away.

However, I'm with my apprentice. I can't let her see me worry, so I put some pep in my voice and say, "Got a nice chunk of change too. So why don't we go to Chinatown and eat something good before heading home?"

"Chinese!!"

"Want anything specific?"

"Crab dumplings!!"

"Crab dumplings it is. Good, aren't they?"

This girl loves crab. She also likes the *kani kakoi* crab formation strategy.

"Cra-bby! Crab, crab, crabby♪"

Watching her dance around, snapping her fingers in the air like scissors this way, part of me thinks I don't need to be strict and send her to the Shogi wolves. She'll get plenty strong growing up as a carefree, naïve spirit, and that might be the best thing for her—.

My smartphone buzzes just as that thought crossed my mind.

"Master? Someone's calling you. Shouldn't you answer?"

"It's fine. The number isn't registered."

Taking a quick look at the screen, I have no idea who is calling so I just put the

phone back in my pocket.

“This happens all the time. Strange phone calls.”

“People you don’t know call you on your phone?”

“Yeah. While I have no idea how they get my number in the first place. Some people avoid the association and contact me directly to do TV spots without an appointment, sometimes it’s a prank call and others: it’s your regular Shogi fan. It’s pretty much always one of those. One guy asked me how to beat *anaguma* with a *shiken bisha*, Fourth File Rook, not too long ago.”

“Pros have it so tough

“You can say that again. That guy should’ve asked someone who plays Ranging Rook.”

“.....”

I received a threatening call from one of Big Sis’s diehard fans saying, “Break up with Ginko! ‘Cause someone’s gonna die if you don’t! Me!!” a while back

I told him, “Somebody’d die if they were dating *that*! Me!!” and hung up right away. I wonder if that guy is still alive.

“Hmm This guy just doesn’t know when to quit.”

“He just keeps calling (>-<).”

The answering machine picks up each time I ignore it, but he dials again rather than leave a message. Haven’t dealt with anyone this insistent in a long time.

It’s gotta be some shady character with a few screws loose in the head. A Ranging Rook player for sure.

It’s getting on my nerves, so I decide to pick up. I answered in a way that would let them know I’m not happy.

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon. Am I correct in assuming this is Mr. Yaichi Kuzuryu’s cell phone?”

“Well, yes but

Hearing a calm male voice on the other end of the line douses my fire a bit, but I can’t let him walk all over me.

Since my own apprentice is right here (mouthing “Go get him, Master” and trying to strike an intimidating crab pose), I decide to be a good example on how to deal with annoying phone calls and speak as calmly as possible.

“And who might you be? Isn’t it common courtesy to introduce yourself first?”

“Why yes, how rude of me. My name is Tsukimitsu.”

“Tsukimitsu? Could you be more specific?”

“The Japan Shogi Association chairman, Seiichi Tsukimitsu.”

The phone falls from my hand.

“Master? You, um, dropped your phone.”

I stand there for a moment absolutely stunned as my apprentice looks at me in disbelief before I finally pick it up. My hands are shaking

A SUMMONS

The Kansai Association’s Player’s Room is a long, thin rectangle.

Located on the third floor, it’s always filled with pro players, Women’s League players, Sub League members and journalists burning the midnight oil. It’s a place where members of the Kansai Shogi world come together to practice and encourage each other in practice groups.

Big Sis and I are in here doing just that, playing practice Shogi.

“Say, Big Sis.”

“..... What?”

Each of us only has ten seconds to make a move, so the clicks come one after another as I look up at her face and try to make it seem like I’m striking up small talk.

“How often do you work with the Practice League these days?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason in particular.”

“Then don’t ask.”

Conversation over. But I can’t give up now.

I couldn’t get everything Onizaka-sensei said yesterday out of my head even after I got home.

Just how am I supposed to raise Ai?

Masters also show their affection by throwing their apprentices into the fire.

His words reminded me of something I heard about in the past.

There was a time when it was said that Shogi Masters *only played against their apprentices twice.*

The first was when they first took them as an apprentice. It was to measure their abilities firsthand.

The second was when they retired from the Sub League without going pro.

And it’s said that the Master let their apprentice win.

You may not become a professional, but you’ve improved so much since you started.

It was a confidence booster——all so they could make a fresh start in a new

world.

Big Sis and I have each played thousands of matches against Master. It's considered common practice for Masters to take a hands-on approach in teaching their apprentices these days.

But I love this story because it just hits you right in your feelings.

I understand this now that I'm a Master myself. Making an apprentice fend for themselves is much more difficult than giving them special treatment.

Unfortunately, pro Shogi players are extremely isolated. There's no one that can help you in the middle of a match. No one can get better if they're always protected.

Only those with self-driven strength to improve can become strong.

That's why I have to expose Ai to the harsh reality of this world but

There's this one huge obstacle in the way.

—Ai is just too damn cute.

She makes me wonder if creatures possessing that level of cuteness should be allowed to exist in this world. There's a phrase that means *even putting it in your eye wouldn't hurt*, and truer words have never been spoken. Just looking at her makes all my problems go away. In that case, even if my eye gets crushed with her inside it, it'll just heal right away. Now how could that hurt? Now isn't that the ultimate image?

But she's more than just cute.

Ai does housework. She's not selfish. She always tries her best and is damn cute for it.

"Is there anything you'd like?"

When I asked her, she fidgeted a little bit before saying, *“I want to play Shogi with you, Master*”

How about that? Just what is this cute creature? She’s just too lovable! No matter how strict anyone tells me to be with her, it’s just not possible! How could you help but give her a treat?!

That’s why I’ll always instinctively hold back and never be able to push her to the edge, and I bet Ai will never get that *I’ll win no matter what it takes!* feeling playing against me. A Master can never be a rival.

That’s where Big Sis comes in.

Knowing her, she’d push Ai to tears without a second thought. Ai’s thirst for revenge after the Practice League test will bring out her best, for sure. A grudge match like that will become a duel to the death.

“Then again Big Sis might

“..... Hold up. Huh? What are you blabbering about?”

There’s absolutely no way that Big Sis would help out with Ai’s training even if I asked her. There’s nothing in it for her.

Plus, she always tries to break her opponent’s spirit, practice match or not. There’s a very real risk that she’d destroy my precious apprentice.

That’s a problem. A big problem.

So, I decided I would try to figure out the secrets behind how she became this superwoman Shogi machine for the time being. That might give me some ideas.

“Big Sis, how’d you get so good at Shogi?”

“Playing Shogi.”

“Well, yes, I get that, but there’s something more, right? Doing Shogi puzzles, replaying Shogi records, a certain way that you studied?”

“Playing Shogi.”

“B But just doing matches all the time, don’t you hit a wall at some point? I’m trying to ask what to do at times like that”

“Play Shogi.”

“You’re right. Playing Shogi is the best answer. But, you know, what about those times when nothing seems to work no matter what you do? When that happens——.”

“Play Shogi.”

“What if you’re in a slump——?”

“Play Shogi.”

“I was stupid for even trying to ask”

“Wanna be laid out on the slab?”

Tempers flaring, our match became just as fiery. Stubbornly pressing forward, our hands are moving so fast they bump into each other over and over again as I squeak out a victory. How’d you like that, Ginko!

“Ryuo.”

“Yes?”

A voice came from behind me as if someone had been waiting for our match to finish.

As to the certain someone that called me out of the blue, it was——.

“..... Ms. Oga?”

“One’s name is thus.”

Sasari Oga. A female association staff member, a secretary to be exact.

She used to be a Women’s League player, but had to retire as a 1-*dan*.

She’s in her early twenties if I remember right, but her bad win-loss record forced her out of the league. The same is true for the main leagues, but the

world of women's Shogi is fierce.

"Ryuo. I apologize for bothering you during practice but——."

"Oh, yes. It's about *that*, right?"

I stand up from my chair and Big Sis glares at me.

"So, you're just going to win and dash?"

"My apologies, twin title holder. The chairman summons."

"Well, you heard her."

"..... Drop dead."

I turn my back on Big Sis's curse and follow Ms. Oga out of the Player's Room. Winning and dashing feels awesome.

▲ THE 17TH

"Excuse me Ms. Oga?"

"One's name is thus."

Not really sure how to ask, so I tried to get some information out of the woman who was walking in front of me.

"Well it's, you know? I was just wondering if you could tell me anything before I speak to the chairman to, you know, put my mind at ease a little bit"

"One is not privy to that information."

Shot down right then and there.

However, I know for a fact she's lying.

"Don't be like that. There's nothing in this world you don't know about, isn't

that right? You'll tell me, won't you?"

"....."

Ms. Oga stops walking.

Since her position as the chairman's secretary sends her back and forth between the Kanto and Kansai branches of the Shogi Association, rumor has it she knows exactly what's happening in the Shogi world at all times.

Also, her position allows her to review all documents that the chairman needs to see due to *special circumstances*.

The chairman has so much faith in this former Women's League player, who knows everything from the public face to the inner workings of the Shogi world, that it's rumored she does most of the job herself.

All this leads to her nickname—the Shadow Don.

"Then I propose an exchange of information."

She said with a quick turn to face me. Exchange? What information?

"A survey that involves you, Ryuo, has been secretly making its way around the association staff and registered players."

"About me? What kind of survey?"

"Predicting who will become your bride."

"Come again?"

"There are three candidates: your Master's daughter, your elder sister apprentice and your elementary school aged live-in apprentice. Here is the data thus far."

Ms. Oga holds out her smartphone like it contains every secret in the world.

Keika Kiyotaki: 2 Votes

Ginko Sora: 17 Votes

Elementary School Girl: 163 Votes

Well, looks like the elementary school girl is way out in front.

“Huh? What the heck is this?! Just what kind of survey is it?! And why is the elementary school girl crushing the competition?!”

“It’s designed to find your best match: your relationship with the candidates, how the candidates treat you and what type of woman you find most attractive. Those elements were all considered to achieve these results. It is one’s assessment.”

“So that means everyone thinks I’ve got a Lolita complex?! The entire Shogi Association?!”

“I’m saying nothing of the sort, only that it’s possible to draw that conclusion from the collected data.”

“What other conclusions are there?!”

“So? In reality, who would you choose?”

Ms. Oga asks as she leans in close to me. I can feel her breath on my face.

“A-A little space please ...”

“Heh-heh. So, one’s feminine wiles were too much for you?”

“No, it wasn’t that.”

“Now I see. So, it’s true you only show interest in elementary school girls.”

“Why’d you jump to that conclusion?! What grounds do you have?!”

“Keep your voice down. We’re in front of the chairman’s office.”

“.....”

As the Shadow Don ignores me, I shut up and she knocks on the door before

announcing our presence.

“This is Oga. I’ve brought the Ryuo.”

“Come in.”

A crisp voice comes from inside the office. Ms. Oga opens the door and I step into the chairman’s office.

And inside that room—I stand before a legend.

“It’s been far too long. I don’t believe we’ve spoken since the Ryuo crowning ceremony.”

“I-It nothing! I, I failed! To keep up correspondence”

“Please relax. I haven’t called you here today to scold you.”

A living, breathing legend directs me to a sofa and says with a tint of humor in his voice, “And besides, you outrank me now, yes? Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

“Not even close Please, don’t even joke about that Eternal Meijin ...”

Eternal Meijin—only people that have held the title of Meijin, one of the Shogi world’s titles that ranks as high as Ryuo, for more than five consecutive seasons are allowed to keep their title when they retire.

There have only been seventeen of them since Soukei Oohashi in the early 1600s—and the man in front of me is number seventeen.

Be that as it may, he is still very much a pro Shogi player with an A ranking.

He should be about the same age as my 50-something-year-old Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, but his lean frame makes him look barely a day over thirty. Simply put, they don’t look the same age at all ...

Moonlight.

That’s how people describe the chairman’s playing style.

His beacon of light first appeared on the Shogi scene when he became the

second junior high school pro Shogi player in history. He then proceeded to advance through C2, C1, B2, B1 and A rankings in all leagues without losing a match and was approved as the fastest and youngest Meijin ever.

Attacking like moonlight seeping through the cracks of a wall, he always found the fastest way to checkmate.

It's said that pro players hoped for a quick death rather than to hold out against the chairman when he went on the attack.

That's because it'll leave behind a beautiful record.

But his sense of aesthetics goes far beyond other players. He's even thrown in the towel, joking that he "let the fastest checkmate get away" before in a must-win match.

He introduced *speed* into a Shogi world that valued strong defense above all else, a genius that practically built the foundation of the modern Shogi scene by himself. None other than Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*.

But the god that granted him this light also took light away from him at the same time.

Blind Shogi Prodigy.

What's even more impressive and awe-inspiring when talking about Seiichi Tsukimitsu than becoming the youngest and fastest Meijin in history is the fact that despite being blinded by an illness in his twenties, he still maintains his position as a top Shogi player.

Even professionals who have a Shogi board in their mind struggle to defeat another pro without being able to see the board all It might be better to say damn near impossible. But he took on that impossibility with a crisp, calm face and continues to compete at the A level to this day. While the current Meijin has a considerable lead on him in terms of titles, there are many who still swear that Seiichi Tsukimitsu is the best to ever play the game.

What would a living legend like him want with me——?

“I would like you to accept an apprentice.”

..... Did I hear that right?

“She’s the granddaughter of a man who has made many generous contributions to the Shogi world for many years. The girl is nine and in the fourth grade.”

“W-Wait just a minute please! Why me? Why would you ask me?!”

“You like them, right? Elementary school girls.”

“Wha-wha-wha-what are you talking about?! I’m not like that at all?!”

“I’m only joking. He made the request.”

Joking around with a stoic face like that’ll give me a heart attack. Please, no more ...

“It seems the girl in question refuses to become an apprentice to anyone without a current A rank or title in their possession.”

“R-Rather high demands

There are only three people registered with the Kansai Association with titles right now: the man in front of me, Chairman Tsukimitsu, Worldly Maestro King Mitsuru Oishi, and me, the Ryuo.

Now if we were talking Women’s Titles, Big Sis has two of them and there’s Yamashiro Ouka and Machi Kugui, but they don’t even seem to be part of the equation. Well, Big Sis couldn’t take an apprentice anyway because she’s in the Sub League.

“My duties as chairman keep me very busy, so accepting an apprentice would be rather difficult. Mr. Oishi is currently on a ritual journey through Kyushu to prepare for his A rank league placement matches. He’s unreachable.”

“Oh ... Is it that time of year again?”

Mr. Oishi has been going on these temple treks ever since his Sub League days and has become something like a seasonal clock for the Kansai Shogi world.

The league that determines who will challenge the current Meijin—the placement matches start in June.

There aren't many matches at all in April and May, so it's a long spring break for pro Shogi players.

"That and Mr. Oishi isn't the type to take an apprentice."

"So, me?"

"I heard that you recently took an apprentice of your own. An elementary school girl at that."

"Well, yes but I don't think I could handle another"

Ai is a great girl, a Shogi whiz kid that can cook and clean. Basically, she's the super apprentice. But even still, she's in elementary school girl, so I need to be very attentive. The fact that she is a live-in apprentice further complicates things.

Like a much younger sister ... Nah, I'd say it's more like I suddenly have a daughter.

Trying to imagine adding another one into the mix is making me dizzy. And there's no doubt that everyone would think I've got a thing for little girls I deny it, but more girls keep showing up I can't talk my way out of that one

"Please don't think on this too hard."

The chairman asks the impossible with a face as crisp as the moon in the night sky.

"A two-hour lesson once or twice a week at her residence in Kobe will suffice. Consider it an extra lesson on your schedule. That's not much of the change, is it?"

“Two two-hour lessons a week

“Just until the placement matches in June, or even until she takes the Practice League test in May. That is fine. She can be registered as my apprentice on paper.”

“.....”

It’s bound to work out okay ... Right?

It’s practically unheard of for someone to take a live-in apprentice like Ai these days. A “dry” relationship between master and apprentice where the only connection is on paper and they never play against each other is actually pretty common. If I fit her into my lesson schedule, it won’t be that big of a deal.

“They’re offering a bonus for accepting the job. I will handle the public side of things, but would you be willing to meet the girl at the very least?”

“..... Understood. I’ll go have a look for myself.”

I can’t possibly say no to the chairman if he’s going to push this much. He’s cleverly cut off all my escape routes.

This conversation would turn out to have a great impact on my life as well as the Shogi world as a whole but I had no idea at the time. No one could’ve ever predicted what was about to happen.

Except for one person—Seiichi Tsukimitsu.

YASHAJIN

So, I went a few days later.

“..... What even is that?”

Kobe, Nada Ward.

An exquisite manor stands in an expensive residential area at the base of Mt. Rokkou. Practically a fortress. A mountain in its own right.

“T this is Kobe? This whole thing is on one plot of land?”

“Oi.”

“?! ”

A voice snaps like a whip behind me. I turn around and see a woman wearing a black suit and sunglasses standing at attention.

A young, beautiful woman with a good sense of style ... However, she’s clearly not some friendly neighbor. This could be bad.

“Yaichi Kuzuryu-sensei Are you not?”

“He’s my twin brother.”

“Funny.”

The sunglass-wearing beauty grabs my shoulder and steers me through the front gate before I could squeal in a fright.

“Sensei has arrived!”

The other side of the gate may as well have been a different world ...

A whole group of people in black suits and sunglasses are standing on either side of the gravel path that travels through the front lawn. Every single one of them is bowing, their hands on their knees, and saying, “Welcome, Sensei!!” at the same time.

I thought this kind of thing only happened in movies! It’s terrifying!

What’s more.

Boom! Boom! Thundering echoes that don’t belong in expensive residential areas ring out.

“T-Taiko drums?! ”

—It's said that really fancy inns would greet players and customers with Taiko drums when they would "camp" overnight for title matches back in the old days of the Shogi world.

But never in a million years did I think I'd show up at some average guy's place to give a lesson and hear Taiko drums instead of the doorbell. Then again, there's no way this is just some average guy's place!

"*Sensei*, the lord of the manor awaits. Please go inside."

"I'm feeling a little queasy."

"Go."

"Okay"

I start to walk and am ushered forward from behind.

What was waiting for me on the other side of the tiger pelt laying on the floor as a doormat was—.

"How wonderful to see you again, Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

"?! You're!"

"Kouten Yashajin, lord of this manor."

It was the elderly gentleman I talked to at Onizaka-*sensei*'s mansion.

"I apologize for not introducing myself at Mr. Onizaka's residence."

In that moment, the real reason Onizaka-*sensei* contacted me clicked.

It wasn't so that he could meet Ai. Well, I'm sure that was part of it but—.

"..... You were watching me, rather than my apprentice, weren't you?"

"Both Chairman Tsukimitsu and Mr. Onizaka spoke very highly of you."

"They did?"

"Indeed. Both claimed that there could be no better instructor for my granddaughter. Please, if you'll follow me—."

I follow Mr. Yashajin down a completely spotless hallway. I briefly considered making a run for it, but after noticing that the sunglassed beauty was right behind me, I realized that was impossible.

Mr. Yashajin comes to a stop up ahead, right in front of a traditional sliding door that depicts an angel and a demon.

“Allow me to introduce you to her, my granddaughter, Ai.”

“Ai?”

He slides open the door to reveal——.



A girl that's about the same age and size as my apprentice Ai.

However, her personal aura couldn't be any different—a black *Ai* sitting there.

■ ANOTHER AI

“Just so you know, I'll never call you Master.”

That was the first thing she—the young girl dressed in black—said to me.

“Make no mistake. You're just a lesson professional grandfather is paying to teach me. I can't stand the thought of a bottom-of-the-barrel Shogi player that happened to claim a title out of sheer luck considering himself to be my Master.”

“.....”

Never would've thought such a cute girl would be so cheeky.

Then again, I've run into more sassy kids who are caught up in their own fantasy world than I can count. It happens to every kid with Shogi talent, their abilities go to their head. All the ones that grow up to become pros never let their ego get popped, instead they bludgeoned their opponents with it. I know how to deal with them.

Taking my glasses and fan out of my second bag, I turn to Mr. Yashajin for confirmation.

“I'm allowed to be strict with her, yes?”

“By all means.”

With her guardian's permission granted, I test the floor cushion that was placed in front of the Shogi board.

Then, I take my big pieces, the Rook and the Bishop, off my side of the board and put them in the piece box.

“A two-piece handicap? That’s fine by me, but it won’t even be a challenge.”

“Ah, good point. A two-piece handicap wouldn’t be a challenge at all.”

I take both of my Lances off the corners of board and put them away in the box.

“Now then, show me what you’ve got.”

“?! ”

Her face twitches for the first time, as if the anger boiling inside of her just set her whole body alight.

“D Don’t treat me as some child?! Do you seriously think you stand a chance with a four-piece handicap?!”

“Stop talking and come get me.”

Ignoring her, I make the first move.

“! Prepare to die.”

Whispering something scary under her breath, lady Ai vents her anger by sliding her first piece with authority.

Neither of us take much time to think as the match progresses. It’s all standard, completely by the book.

“..... I see. You’re well-versed on how to play handicap matches.”

“Of course I am. See? I’m already in victory position.”

“Are you? So, you think you’ve already won?”

“Don’t act tough just because you’re a pro. Just what do you think you can do?”

“Let’s see ”

I take a moment to contemplate the Shogi records in my head.

The ones that come to mind are all from before I turned pro Records from my time in the Sub League.

For the most part, Practice League and Sub League match records aren't made public. That's because their non-pro records aren't considered to be worth much.

However, there are diamonds hidden in the rough.

All you could ever need to know about how to play handicap matches against superior or inferior opponents are contained in Practice League and Sub League match records.

In handicap matches, the prodigies from all over Japan play a completely different game from those played by amateurs. So many strategies that never make it into standard practice come to life all the time there.

I found one of those hidden diamonds and tried my hand.

"I can do this."

".....?!"

Ai's face twitches, shocked by a change she'd never seen before.

I thought she was just a bratty kid, but that reaction tells me she's trying really hard. That's kinda cute.

"I can do this, too."

"Huh? Huuuh?! That move is it allowed?"

I get a sadistic kick out of throwing the board into chaos. Ai's fingers start trembling with every unexpected move I make.

"So? Having fun yet?"

"Ugh kh, gah"

It's not just players in the Sub and Practice Leagues. Professional players play thousands, tens of thousands of handicap matches as the upper player.

I haven't even been a pro for two years, but with all my time in the Sub League, I have quite a bit of experience with these matches. Pros have played with a handicap so much more than amateurs, there's no comparison.

And there are ways to utterly destroy lower players.

"What's wrong? I thought you wanted a challenge?"

"Ngh! N-Not yet!"

Biting her lip to bear the shame, Ai flicks her long black hair over her shoulder with those thin fingers before squeezing her fists together with a moan.

This pretty girl plays extremely pretty Shogi.

A straightforward playing style unbefitting her twisted personality. Simple, by the books Shogi. She must've been lucky enough to have a great teacher that drilled the standard formations into her head when she was younger.

But there's a downside. Relying on the standard too much means that she's defenseless once the standards no longer apply.

Her style is too pretty. I don't feel any stubbornness, any willingness to be dragged through the mud and emerge victorious coming from her.

My apprentice makes loads of mistakes in the early and mid-games only to turn the match on its head in the late game. This girl is the exact opposite. She's studious, but there's no depth. In other words, she has no talent.

—That's all she's got

Now that I've got this Ai's skill level figured out, I move in to end the match.

"!! There!"

She blocks my first attack, face tense with fright.

Standard strategy for handicap matches is all about attacking.

There's nothing that tells you how to defend.

That's why amateurs who rely on the standards start to fall apart as soon as the match veers away from what they know. Then, their spirit breaks once the counterattack hits.

"....."

I watch Ai's head slump. She's staring into her lap and I could swear I heard her spirit snap.

Seeing a bratty young lady fall off her high horse is a pitiful sight.

No matter how much she whined, how much trash she talked, one look at the board clearly showed how weak she is. I doubt that she's ever felt more ashamed in her life.

—But she's suffered enough. Might as well put her out of her misery with a clean, swift end ...

With that thought in mind, I started an all-out offensive. Ai's defensive formation was soon riddled with holes after taking the full force of a pro's attack.

She's moving pieces into place to fill them with weak, trembling fingers, but that's only delaying the inevitable.

I've delivered a fatal blow, and there's no way to prevent that now.

"..... I"

So, she's about to admit defeat.

I was sure she was going to throw in the towel. Her spirit broke long ago.

But.

"I'm not done yet!"

"Hm?"

She looks up from the board and locks eyes with me. Sharp eyes, glowing with demonic tenacity.

Those aren't the eyes of someone who's given up.

Ai's spirit, which I thought was broken, was actually still in one piece.

That is to say——.



“I can still fight!!”

Ai uses every single one of her captured pieces to keep my attack at bay.

It wasn't long before I looked at what the board had become and gasped.

“?! When did?”

I have no idea how she did it, but her defensive formation recovered, despite being under siege this whole time.

It's not a standard defense, not by a long shot.

Her Golds and Silvers that would protect the King were scattered all over the place by my bombardment, and yet Ai's formation is strangely solid.

It's crooked and looks paper-thin, but the pieces protecting the King are bound together by some mysterious force, as if symbolizing her strong will.

—So she used my offensive to rebuild her defense?!

No, it's more than that ... She is setting up so she can cut off my attack and counter it!

This skill

“Defensive Shogi, huh?”

That was when I first realized I had completely misread Ai's talent.

It's not that she has good *offense* or has in-depth knowledge of standard strategy.

It's just the opposite.

There are some Shogi players who can harness surprising strength when under attack.

Thanks to a certain manga, these people have recently become known as *defenders*, extraordinary players who can find ways to use their opponent's

attack strategy against them.

It's all about skilled prediction and calculating as quickly and precisely as possible. A kind of sixth sense that allows them to deny their opponent's plan, pulling the board into chaos with brute force.

All of these skills are necessary so one can emerge victorious when forced to defend.

However, the most important thing of all is—having the ironclad mental fortitude to never give up even when the going gets tough.

Mental prowess, having the nerves to press on without fear of getting hurt even when staring down the face of the blade, being brave enough to walk through a hail of bullets. A spirit strong enough to take damage and still fight to the bitter end of an intense Shogi match.

In the end, that's unbreakable spirit.

Ai Yashajin has an unbreakable spirit.

—This girl is good!!

Pull back the plating known as *standard* and you'll find something stronger, fiercer and that shines more beautifully than any plating—a sparkling jewel.

REQUEST

Be that as it may, I regrouped my own forces and put Ai in checkmate under no uncertain terms. Love has no place on a Shogi board.

“Sob!”

“I’ll buy that you know what you’re doing, but your skills have a long way to go.”

“.....!!”

Cheeks glistening with tears, Ai slams a handful of pieces onto the board and glares at me like an angry demon.

Then I snapped my voice like a whip when she stood up to leave without saying a word.

“Manners!”

“Shut up!! I hate you!!”

Mr. Yashajin had watched the match without saying a word, but of course he couldn’t let that slide.

“Watch your mouth, Ai! Do as *Sensei* tells you.”

“..... How could you, grandfather?!!”

Now on her feet, Ai leaves the room with tears pouring down her face. The young woman in sunglasses takes off after her with a start, but Mr. Yashajin stays seated on his ankles and lets out a long sigh.

Once I put all the pieces back in the box, I lower my head to the elderly gentleman in hopes that I haven’t made a big mistake.

“..... I’m sorry, sir. I might’ve pushed her a bit too far”

“No, that was acceptable,” he said in a clear voice. Then, “Haaa,” he sighed again as if he has a lot on his mind. “..... I wanted to ask a Women’s League player to teach her at first.”

“She didn’t go along with it, did she?”

“Not in the slightest. She claimed that Women’s League players were too weak”

A lot of people say that.

Specifically, many bratty kids like her and middle-of-the-pack amateurs have no problem with calling Women's League players who are stronger than themselves "weak." It all boils down to the odd idea that playing against one of them will make them weaker and they refuse to take lessons from any of the Women's League players.

Those people will never become good and, even if they did, they have some serious issues as people. They'll never get a date, that's for sure. Probably play Ranging Rook Nah, playing style has got nothing to do with it.

"My presence seems to intimidate middle-level players, that's what I found while instructing her, and more veteran players are too lenient with children Ai's age ... I believe that a young, strict teacher such as yourself will be the best thing for her."

"Well, if you really think so"

"So, *Sensei*. As for becoming Ai's instructor"

I think she has an interesting talent. I'd love to see how far it takes her.

But I need to focus on training my first apprentice, Ai. While this arrangement might just mean adding a few lessons a week, dealing with that kind of kid just isn't possible.

I'll turn it down.

But just as I was about to say so.

"..... She has dealt with more than her share of misfortune."

Mr. Yashajin managed to squeeze the words out while staring at his knees.

"After both of her parents passed away in the same accident, I have taken it upon myself to look after and raise her as her grandfather but I have gotten soft in my old age, and I'm afraid I may have spoiled her."

"I'm sorry to hear that"

Learning that both Ai's parents had passed away shakes me to the core.

"All she ever wants to do is play Shogi, and I have allowed it. Unfortunately, that resulted in her playing mostly by herself and hardly ever allowing anyone else to approach her."

"By herself?"

Those words cause another tremor.

"She didn't get that good by playing against someone else?"

"That's correct. She is the only one at this residence who can play and I've been informed that she keeps to herself while at school, although I believe she has played over the Internet or against a computer a few times."

"She came that far on her own?"

The fact that she acquired all those skills playing Shogi against herself, that's the biggest shock of all.

It's very rare that someone goes pro just by reading Shogi books and studying match records. It's also true that that's the only way for people out in rural areas to get stronger when they aren't fortunate enough to have an opponent.

Those who do make it that way tend to distinguish themselves with unusual skills and senses.

Could that be what's behind Ai's talent?

"She has all but ceased listening to me and I, myself, am too afraid of being despised by my own granddaughter to take a stronger stand with her ... While it shames me to admit it, the girl will only listen to those who can best her at Shogi at this point. From the moment she approached me to ask for a proper Shogi instructor, I immediately wanted to find a professional Shogi player to become Ai's role model. Not just for Shogi, but to teach her how to be an adult."

"..... Why is she so devoted to playing Shogi?"

“Because her parents taught her how to play.”

The one thing that her deceased father and mother left to her was Shogi. That’s what Mr. Yashajin tells me.

“Her parents met at a Shogi club in Tokyo while studying in university. The bond they forged while sitting across the board is what led to their marriage. They wasted no time in teaching their only daughter how to play and would often spend nights playing together as a family unit. Ai’s happiest memories were made playing Shogi on those nights. That and”

“And?”

“She may feel that people will eventually disappear from her life, but the Shogi board and pieces will always stay by her side.”

“.....”

That’s an even sadder reason than I could’ve imagined.

Shogi is the best tool to bring people together. It’s possible for two people who understand the game well enough to have a conversation over the board. That’s why games like Shogi and Go have been nicknamed *hand dialogue*.

Let’s say I read some Shogi match records dating back to the 1600s.

Looking through them, I’d be able to tell what each player was thinking and what they were trying to accomplish without too much difficulty. Looking at where they used their waiting time would also give me a good idea as to what they were feeling during the match, internal wavering and so on.

Reading records like this makes it possible to converse with the dead.

But Playing Shogi as a way to maintain a connection with the dead, I think, will end up hurting Ai more in the end.

If strengthening her bond with her deceased parents is why she wants to get better at Shogi, is she being weighed down too much by her past?

Once that thought crossed my mind—the only answer I could get was that I wanted a little more time to think about accepting a position as Ai’s instructor or not.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*

Mr. Yashajin called out to me as if clinging to the last ray of hope. He’s tearing up.

“I beg of you, please take Ai under your wing. I beg of you

The elderly gentleman started groveling on the spot, putting his hands together and repeating “I beg of you” over and over.

What I saw kneeling before me wasn’t a rich or influential person, but a wizened old man who was only thinking about his granddaughter.

▲ GIRL'S NIGHT

I quickly, yet respectfully, declined Mr. Yashajin’s offer to drive me home and exited the manor through the many archways created by the small army of people in black suits bowing on either side of the path. “Thank you, *Sensei*!!” Another rousing chorus. It almost feels like a graduation ceremony. I might cry.

Then.

“Chairman!”

I called Mr. Tsukimitsu the instant I was clear of the manor.

“Just what the heck was that?! I don’t know how the family got that rich, but I don’t think I want to?!”

“I would prefer you not say things that could damage their reputation,” says the one worthy of the 17th Eternal Meijin title in a cool voice. “The Japan Shogi Association is a public organization. Under no circumstances would connections

to elicit groups of any kind be allowed.”

“But! That was so obviously——!”

“While I cannot deny that the elderly Mr. Yashajin once owned a well-known gambling institution in the Kobe area, he has long since retired. After submitting foreclosure documents to the police, his company now operates in several industries including construction, entertainment, security, as well as designing and producing new Pachinko machines. Several former police officers hold board member positions throughout the company. I would like to make that perfectly clear.”

Adults can be real dirty

“So then? Are you willing to make an addition to your lesson schedule?”

“..... I played against her just to see for myself.”

“Oh?”

“While I admit she’s very talented, the girl hates my guts. I made her cry.”

“I see. She seems to have taken a liking to you. I knew I could count on you.”

“Did you hear anything I just said?!”

“Out of all the professionals sent to their manor, you are the first to even speak with her.”

“.....”

“I await your favorable reply, Ryuo.”

“I’m baaack.”

Getting home to my apartment a little after eight o’clock at night, I open the unlocked door and hold up some food I picked up on the way home as I call

inside.

“Keika? Thanks for looking after the place while I was out. I picked up some good sushi so let’s chow woooooooooah!?”

What I saw in my own room was,

—a clearly uncomfortable and grimacing Keika,

—my apprentice with her head buried in a blanket, sobbing like mad,

—and Big Sis sitting on her ankles next to the Shogi board in full battle mode.

All at once.

“Umm What’s going on here? Did someone open a portal to hell, because there’s something demonic about the air in here?”

“Hmm.”

Keika presses her finger against her lower lip, deep in thought, and tilts her head to the side before answering. “A girl’s night?”

“I don’t claim to know the first thing about girl’s nights, but I don’t think they involve my elementary school-aged apprentice shoving her head under a blanket with the waterworks going full blast, do they?”

Because if they are, girl’s nights are even scarier than hell

“Hey, Big Sis.”

I ask the girl obviously behind this miasma of pain and suffering, Ginko Sora.

“Why are you in Osaka?”

“.....”

Maintaining silence, Big Sis—is dressed in a full kimono.

A very flashy one at that, with crimson sleeves and scarlet *hakama* pants. It only enhances her natural beauty, making her drop-dead gorgeous. Someone

dressed like that clearly doesn't belong in this cheap two-room apartment.

Kimonos like that are normally saved for special occasions like coming-of-age ceremonies, but Women's League players will wear them for extremely important matches.

In other words, title matches.

Big Sis is currently in the middle of five matches to defend her Queen title. Or, at least, she should be.

"Didn't you leave for Shizuoka yesterday? Shouldn't you be staying at Fugetsurou Inn? And why are you still wearing that? Don't tell me the match is already over?"

Big Sis couldn't answer.

While Women's League Title Matches end in one day, it's almost unheard of for Big Sis to make it back to Osaka on the same day. Even moreso was the fact she came back without changing, making this freakishly unusual. What in the world happened

"Yaichi. Here."

"?"

I take a look at the article Keika has open on her smartphone, which she handed to me.

Queen Ginko Sora dominates the title challenger! Claims first match without needing two minutes of waiting time. Challenger, "Women's King" Ryou Tsukiyomizaka surrenders before lunch break. Shortest title match on record.

Oh, wow

"Snow White is too strong haha."

"A princess? More like a demon king"

“My precious Archangel broke (tear)”

“Ryou’s spirit snapped in the early game after losing so much ground
.....”

“There’s a notice on the public blog that says: *circumstances prevented a review session*. Does that mean Ms. Tsukiyomizaka couldn’t even finish it? Too much of a shocked mess to continue?”

“Here’s something from the scene. The only one to appear at the big board for the review session was Queen Ginko Sora. She even shook hands with fans after giving her own recap (^-^)/”

“Looks like those circumstances were all on Ryou after all.”

“So Lady Gin is now a perfect 48-0 against the Women’s League. She’ll reach fifty victory stars in a row in no time at this rate.”

“She should have to give a handicap next time <— I’m being serious here.”

Reading all the Shogi fans’ tweets gave me a pretty good idea as to what happened.

But there are still a few things I don’t understand.

1. Why did Big Sis come back wearing her kimono?
2. What’s the meaning behind using two minutes of waiting time?

I get out my own smartphone and pull up the Mynavi Women’s Open public access site and take a look at the match record. Since they post the men’s and women’s title match records for anyone to see for free, the best of the best are only a few clicks away. Why not have a look for yourself?

“Let’s see here Big Sis had the first move, and she went with——.”

Snap!

I heard a piece hit the Shogi board and look in that direction. Big Sis just made

the same move as the record on my phone.

“..... Is that an invitation?”

“.....”

She didn't say anything, but I can practically feel the burning energy from her fingertips, itching for a battle but nowhere to go.

So I sit across the board from her and make the second move—just as the challenger had done.

“..... Now I see. Ryou led the match into *yokofu dori*: Side Pawn Capture. That means that a wrong move somewhere brought the match to an end.”

Side Pawn Capture is one of the Static Rook strategies that turns the early game into a brawl.

“Because Side Pawn matches tend to hinge on who has spent more time studying Ah! That's the change she went with. Okay, so then”

Ryou's twenty-fourth move was the cause.

This particular strategy was considered Defensive Advantage by the Pro Shogi Leagues *two weeks ago*, but the Kansai (West) Sub League determined it to be Offensive Advantage *just last week*. They turned the standard on its head.

Ryou, living in Kanto (East), didn't know she was using an outdated standard. Big Sis's understanding was *one week ahead*. That determined the match.

Apart from the 3-*dan* league where Sub League members with that rank go head-to-head, and the yearly trip for everyone with 2-*dan* and below, there's almost no interaction between Kanto and Kansai.

And since that annual trip hasn't happened for the past couple of years, any research done by 2-*dan* and below league members wouldn't have crossed the barrier between east and west. In other words, everything stays under wraps.

So, the only way to get your hands on their latest research is to play against

the Sub League members yourself. Ryou didn't have the option because she is part of the Kanto Women's League. She forged ahead using an old standard with no idea that a new counter strategy had been discovered in Kansai.

— It's not skill, but knowledge that wins in this era.

If you were to say that's just the way Shogi is played nowadays, that would be the end of it. However, whether it's okay to show that side of Shogi to the fans during a title match is a quandary all pros share ...

"So that's what the two minutes was for? Finish the match with the next move or draw it out into a hard-fought battle."

"..... Big Sis didn't say anything, but her silence tells me that I'm right; as well as the fact that she is still dealing with that quandary right now.

"Haaa" I let out a long sigh.

Putting on a serious face and fixing my posture, I tell her, "I think you made the right decision, Big Sis. As a professional, you should always use the latest information to your advantage. Even if it would bring a title match to an early end."

"....."

"I would've made the same decision if I were in your shoes. Considering how much Side Pawn Capture strategies keep changing, Ryou was naïve if she thought what worked two weeks ago would still be valid."

I'm sure she's cursing that naïveté right now. Hopefully she doesn't break anything ...

Well, at least that explains what Big Sis is doing in my apartment. To be blunt—.

"You didn't get enough, did you?"

"....."

The match came to an end just as her competitive spirit was kicking in, but it had nowhere to go. That's why she came back to Osaka right away: to play against me. She made a beeline for the bullet train, long sleeves swaying at her sides, to get to my apartment as soon as possible. Big Sis's unworldly need for satisfaction is coming across loud and clear. It's all because she considers me to be her personal punching bag. Ever since we were little kids.

But I had somewhere to be and wasn't home, so she played against Ai in my place instead. I'm sure by that point she didn't care who it was, she just had to play Shogi. Since the ones who were actually there aren't saying anything, I turn to Keika and ask her, "So? What handicap did my apprentice have when she got crumpled up like this?"

"It was just the Rook at first."

"..... At first?"

This had such an ominous ring to it, I couldn't help but ask.

"Ai wanted to play an even match. But Ginko wouldn't have it and insisted on a Rook handicap. They eventually agreed on *te naori*, with the original handicap being the Rook but——."

"Ah ah ah ..."

Te naori means that the handicap is adjusted according to the win-loss record. Big Sis would play without her Bishop if Ai won, but would take out both Lances if Ai lost.

However——Ai had already lost at that point.

I got a good grasp of how the matches went from then on.

"How far did it drop? Four?"

"Six."

"Six, huh That's quite a shock."

That means that Ai lost to a four-piece handicap—Big Sis played without her Rook, Bishop and both Lances. The way my apprentice is now, she should have no trouble contending with Big Sis when she's two pieces down.

So why, why is it that Ai got steamrolled?

According to *te naori* rules, Ai had to win three times to force an even match with that starting point. But she was so focused on having to win three in a row that she lost her cool at that point. I bet she couldn't concentrate on the current match and lost without putting up much of a fight. Once that happened, a little voice inside her head kept saying "I've got to get that one back!" and she stopped thinking straight, which resulted in her ultimate demise.

Keeping a cool head is far more difficult than mastering Shogi techniques. It's rare for any pro to lose their skills with age, but plenty lose their mental edge.

Ai was driven back into a corner and faced with a four-piece handicap match that she absolutely had to win, only to have her confidence and pride shattered when she lost

"So then, she's embarrassed to look her master in the face after such a pitiful showing?"

"That may be part of it, but I don't think it's the main reason."

Keika reaches down to take a King from the Shogi board. Looking closely, there's a small nick on the surface.

"Ai was so angry at herself that she bit it in despair——."

"Oh, and left a bite mark on it? She thinks I'd be angry——."

"Her tooth came out."

"Come again?"

"And here it is."

Whoa.

A cute little white tooth falls out of a handkerchief into Keika's hand and she shows it to me.

"It's a baby tooth and it made a clean break, so I think she'll be fine but ..."

"Well she's a girl after all."

She doesn't want me to see her with a hole in her teeth. But isn't it pretty rare for a nine-year-old to still have baby teeth? Should I put it under her pillow tonight?

"But Ai fought really hard. She got right back up no matter how many times she lost——."

"That was just reckless. No one gets better by having their confidence destroyed. Ai, are you listening?"

Since my apprentice was hiding her head in the blanket, I had no choice but to talk to her motionless bottom.

"Don't let all those victories in the Practice League go to your head. If you don't figure out how to win with a handicap on your side, higher ranking players will wipe the floor with you and you won't be able to do anything about it. You get that now?"

Ai's talent is like a vast plot of land that has more potential than anyone else has.

But as of now, there's only a rickety little house standing on that land. One strong gust of wind, and it'll collapse. She needs a strong Shogi foundation before her talent can come into play.

Now that I've lectured my raw apprentice, I lighten my tone and offer her a treat.

"Now, you must be hungry after all those matches? I brought home some sushi, so eat up. I even got some of your favorite crab ones? The crab rolls with miso?"

“.....”

A thin little arm shot out from under the blanket. I placed one of the crab rolls on an open hand and it disappeared under the blanket just as quickly. She apparently still has no intention of letting me see her without that tooth.

“.....!!!”

“Ah, sorry. The wasabi might burn a little.”

Thump! Thump! My apprentice’s legs vigorously pound the floor. Well, she seems like herself. That’s a relief.

“..... There’s no rush, Ai. You can improve little by little, that’s fine.”

I gently stroke the lump in the blanket that (I’m pretty sure) is her head.

“Oh, and Big Sis. I realize you still have energy to burn after the match ended so quickly, but would you please not use my apprentice as a punching bag?”

Big Sis said nothing. Just keeps munching on sushi.

“Seriously! What am I supposed to say to her parents if their precious daughter, whose future they entrusted me with, were to get crushed by someone in the same Shogi family no less? My apprentice isn’t your toy, Big Sis!”

“There’d be no point if her spirit broke before she started getting really good at Shogi,” said Keika, as if taking a walk down memory lane. “Speaking of that, Yaichi. Do you remember any of the girls you made friends with at the Shogi Association’s classroom or at the house and then they never came back again?”

“Now that I think about it yeah? A few.”

“They stopped coming because Ginko destroyed each of them.”

Now what was that for?

“Ginko always jumped in after your games ended and beat all of them and used no waiting time. Normal kids would get frustrated by the gap in talent and

quit Shogi right then and there.”

“I bet

Big Sis and I are two years apart. I’m older, but Big Sis became Master Kiyotaki’s apprentice two weeks before I did, making her Shogi history longer than mine. Hence, the “big” sister. I’m pretty sure I lost the first time we played.

But people outside our Shogi family don’t know that, and kids about my age had their confidence blown to smithereens after losing to Big Sis despite being older than she was.

“As for why Ginko did what she did——.”

“I already know. It was her way of saying: ‘You’re not old enough to play with girls,’ right?”

“..... So that’s how you took it.”

“Huh? I don’t think there’s any other way to take it, is there?”

Keika lets out a small sigh as if to say, “good grief” and pops another piece of sushi into her mouth, enjoying the flavor for a moment before continuing.

“People like me who knew the extent of their talent going in can put up with that. But pretty much every kid plays Shogi thinking they’re the best in the world, don’t you agree?”

“Well, yeah.”

Pros are exactly the same. We’re just really big kids, all of us.

“But then there’s ‘losing to a girl.’ That hurts just a little bit more, doesn’t it?”

“Even for girls?”

“Lose to a boy and it’s an *oh well, couldn’t be helped* kind of feeling. That’s just how it is. I don’t think that’s a good thing though

There’s a gap in Shogi skill between men and women of the same age.

There shouldn't be one because it's a game that takes place between the ears ... But it would be difficult to deny that it's there. That's the truth, although there are anomalies like Big Sis that turn up every once in a while.

"That's especially true for girls who are trying to get into the Women's League. They'll always be competing against other girls, so they always think, 'I can keep going!' even after a loss. But losing to a younger girl? All the excuses disappear."

"....."

"That's why they pull out all the stops and fight tooth and nail to win. But it hurts so much after a loss that they can't recover when losing against girls. They're rivals. I think that's why Miss Tsukiyomizaka was in so much pain, so she couldn't do a review session."

Moistening her throat with a sip of tea, Keika makes a face I've never seen on her before and whispers.

"A woman's enemy is always other women."

The girl's night from hell came to an end once all the sushi was eaten.

Keika was the first to leave, saying, "It's getting warm at night," followed by the still silent Big Sis, long kimono sleeves swinging at her sides as she went to the door. Ai didn't come to see her off. I could only see her little bottom sticking out from under the blanket from here in the doorway. Adorable.

Big Sis slipped on her wooden *pokkuri* sandals and stepped outside before she said a single word, "Yaichi."

"Yes?"



“She’s getting worse. That one.”

With that, Big Sis closes the door.

Her silver hair sparkling in the streetlights along with those words hit me like a curse, impaling my eyes and heart like needles.

“... No ...”

I stood in the doorway as her sandals’ wooden clogs faded away.

Ai is getting worse?

“But, that couldn’t be? But”

Then I had an idea. Something that’s been making me worry.

Ai came to Osaka to learn how to play Shogi from me.

It’s the perfect learning environment but that’s exactly why I started thinking *maybe the environment is a little too perfect*.

Maybe she’s too used to always having friends to play against, her Master to always teach her and having fun every day. Maybe she’s getting complacent, thinking things are fine the way they are.

And getting complacent is a competitor’s first step to failure.

Those who can’t push themselves harder and harder every day will fall from grace before they know it. No matter how bright someone’s talent shines, it’ll fade away without the constant drive to improve.

Onizaka-sensei’s words pop into my head.

A rival.

That’s what Ai doesn’t have. That’s why she can’t get better.

“In that case——.”

I made a call to confirm that I would teach Ai Yashajin the next day.

RECORD 2

A i y a s h a j i n

夜叉神天衣

BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 10TH (9 YEARS OLD)

BLOOD TYPE: A

HOMETOWN: KOBE CITY, HYOGO PREFECTURE

SPECIALTIES: BISHOP EXCHANGE
MAKING INSULTS

FAVORITE THINGS: TEA
HONEY ALTENA PASTRIES



NEW WORLD

“... Why would you tell me to come to a place like this?”

Ai Yashajin arrived in Osaka the following Saturday. Clothed in a black outfit like what she had on when we first met, a woman in a black suit is with her.

I asked them to meet me in front of Tennouji Zoo. With good view of Tsutenkaku Tower: it's one of Osaka's signature landmarks.

Dressed in casual jeans and a T-shirt, I smirk and say, “I thought a trip to the zoo might help us get to know each other better!”

“Akira. Notify the police.”

“At once.”

The woman behind her—the same woman in black who talked to me when I first went to Ai's manor, pulls out her smartphone and starts dialing without a second thought.

“K-Kidding! Just joking! We're going to play Shogi, what else?”

“I'd prefer it if the only joke you made was your face.”

“You know how players usually open the Bishop Path in the first few turns? Let's open the path to our hearts.”

“Gross.”

“.....”

A few harsh words and my spirit is close to breaking.

I'm so used to being around friendly grade schoolers like my apprentice and her friends these days that dealing with a cold, prickly one like her really hurts.

Then again, I'm used to Big Sis walking all over me. This is nothing new.

“Well? Are we supposed to play Shogi at the zoo? Are we going to use the

animals as pieces?”

“We’re not here for the zoo ... But we’ll probably see some very unusual creatures.”

“Meaning?”

I turn my back on Ai’s irritated, sharp-tongued question while putting on sunglasses and a baseball cap. “Follow me,” I say and start walking.

“Where are we going? The zoo entrance is over there.”

“Forget about the zoo and keep up.”

Facing away from the zoo, I walk toward Tsutenkaku Tower.

The woman in a black suit (named Akira, I think) must’ve figured out where we’re heading because she anxiously says, “Oi, *Sensei*. Don’t tell me

“We’re here.”

It’s a long tunnel beneath elevated train tracks. I come to a stop right in front of the dim arcade’s entrance.

“Jyan Jyan Alley.” I’m pretty sure it has an actual name but I don’t know what it is.

“... Huh? What is this dirty street?”

“This area is known as New World. Think of it as Osaka’s deepest *underground*.”

With Tsutenkaku Tower standing right overhead, this used to be Osaka’s greatest Shogi hotspot.

“Up until about ten years ago, Kansai’s no, western Japan’s largest Shogi classroom was beneath the tower. The best unregistered players from all over the country came here every day to sharpen their skills.”

“In this tiny little dump?”

“It’s smaller than it was, but the name is still here. Follow me.”

We head into the alleyway. It’s pretty dark, even in the afternoon. Ai hesitates for a moment but eventually comes inside with Akira protecting her every step of the way.

Although the area is trying to change its vulgar image to something a bit more tourist friendly, there are plenty of drunk people mixed in with the visitors even on Saturday afternoon. Most of the establishments around here are bars. There are kebab places and restaurants where you can grill meat right at the table too. And right next to a shady-looking place with live softshell turtles, in a street-side aquarium, is what we came here for.

“..... This place’ll work.”

I stop outside of a Shogi parlor called Twin Kings Club. Since the outer wall is all glass, you can watch the matches from outside the building. There are a surprising number of people inside.

Ai looks a little uncomfortable, but I wave her up to the glass.

“Take a look. This is a lot more fun than a zoo, right?”

“It’s all just old people ...”

She stands on her tiptoes, trying to get a better look at the matches on the other side of the glass. Seeing her focus so hard, her forehead and the tip of her nose pressing up against it, makes me smile. She may act all grown up, but she is still in elementary school.

“So? Think you can take them?”

“..... Humph!”

Watching the level of play on the other side of the glass, Ai flicks her hair over her shoulder and says with all the confidence in the world, “They’re all pushovers. You had me come all the way to Osaka for this? Well, I might as well beat a few of them before going home.”

“That’s the spirit.”

But I was smirking on the inside.

Careful not to let her in on that, there’s something I need to confirm before we go inside.

“Hey, you have any money on you?”

“An untraceable *Black Card*, yes.”

Actually using that would scare the crap out of me.

“..... Akira, was it? Do you have any paper bills?”

“Several have been prepared. The lord of the manor has instructed me not to be frugal with money. It’s at your disposal.”

“All right then. Please pay the entrance fee. That, and can I have a few 1,000-yen bills? Also, any old receipts would be great too.”

“The bills are no problem But, what are the receipts for?”

Rather than giving a direct answer, I pull some scotch tape and an empty cigarette box out of my pocket. Ai doesn’t hide a suspicious frown.

“You smoke? You’re underage.”

“Nah. We need it for this.”

I roll one of the bills I got from Akira into a thin cylinder and wrap it with a receipt, text on the inside, tape it all in place and it looks like an ordinary cigarette. I roll up four more and put all five into the empty box.

“That should do it. Take this.”

“I don’t get the point What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re going to issue *shinken*.”

“*Shin* *ken*?”

“Basically, you’ll be betting on Shogi matches. 1,000 yen is the buy-in. Lose

and that's what you pay. The strongest players around here won't even sit down unless there's money on the table."

That's the reason all these Shogi parlors started popping up in Jyan Jyan Alley.

Shinken players in the underground scene all over the country came here looking for money and a good battle.

Laws have really clamped down on betting in recent years, but there was a time when these *shinken* players made more money than pros. Heck, it's said that millions of yen could change hands in a single match. 1,000 yen would seem like time-killing pocket change to the people back then.

But now making a sizable bet would get the police involved and they'd shut down the whole establishment. That's why they jump through these hoops to disguise the money.

"Show the cigarette box to issue a *shinken* match. Win and you'll get a roll. Lose, and you give one to your opponent. Keep playing until that box is empty."

"And what if it gets full?"

"Then I have nothing to teach you. I'll sign you up to take the Practice League test tonight."

"Ohhh? Then you'll be out of work in a few hours."

Ai snatches the cigarette box from my hand and follows Akira inside.

I squeeze the brim of my baseball hat and put it down over my eyes to hide my face before joining them.

■ FIRST *SHINKEN* MATCH

Just as I expected, the smell of cigarettes and alcohols was practically ingrained inside Twin Kings Club.

“... This is worse than middle-of-nowhere Mahjong parlors,” Akira says under her breath.

I’ve never been that far into the outskirts, but I bet she’s right. This is pretty bad, even for Shogi parlors.

Dirty words are flying back and forth inside and the staff really doesn’t care that people spill ramen or their cheap *sake* over the boards. Or when thoughtless people put out their cigarettes on the piece stands.

Akira handed a crisp bill to the old man sitting behind the counter.

“Sir. One child and two adults, please.”

“.....”

The old man took the entrance fee, but didn’t smile back, let alone say “thank you.” The look in his eye makes it crystal clear that he thinks women and children just get in the way.

“..... What do I do now?”

“Normally, you’d get a Match Card about now, but”

People here assigned themselves a rank. With no Match Cards to speak of, it looks like the system here is completely up to the customers.

This Shogi parlor caters exclusively to *shinken* players.

“Well, not much of a problem, is it? Since this place is full of pushovers, you can beat everyone here, right?”

“Well, yes, that’s true ...”

“Akira and I will pretend to play Shogi over there while we keep an eye on you. Go find someone that looks bored toward the back and challenge them to a *shinken* match.”

“... Fine.”

Looking like she’s about to take her first steps into a haunted house, Ai does

as she was told and walks to the back of the Shogi parlor.

Plenty of people are in the middle of a match, but there was one person without an opponent and looking very bored.

Leopard pattern clothes. A head of hair like broccoli. And eyes twinkling behind golden-framed colorfully-tinted sunglasses that sparkle like a wild animal. A leopard, in the flesh. No, a panther. What path in life would lead someone to turn out like that?

However, there was something bothering me a heck of a lot more—.

“Oi, *Sensei*. Is that an old lady? Or perhaps an old man?”

“..... A little of both, probably.”

Those are women’s clothes. The famous Osakan leopard print dress. But this is Osaka, and the possibility it’s a man wearing a leopard-skin dress with permed hair can’t be ignored. This is New World. Seeing people from all walks of life isn’t unusual down here.

“There’s a possibility it’s a creature that escaped from the Tennouji Zoo But it’s highly unlikely that an elderly woman would come to a Shogi parlor. I say it’s a male.”

“But don’t forget, old ladies tend to go inside men’s restrooms quite a bit in Osaka.”

While she and I were having one of the most pointless conversations ever, Ai holds up the cigarette box right at Panther’s eye level.

“Care to play without a handicap?”

“... Have a seat.” A voice that is husky from beer and cigarettes. The gender is still a mystery. After a rougher-than-necessary Pawn flip, Panther is on offense. The battle began as soon as Ai pressed the switch on the chess clock.

Then, Panther makes a *surprising* move right off the bat.

As soon as both of them opened their Bishop path, “Gah, oopsy.”

Panther did it.

The practically unbelievable——8 Six Pawn!



歩: PAWN 香: LANCE 銀: SILVER
角: BISHOP 桂: KNIGHT 金: GOLD
飛: ROOK 玉: KING

“?! Ummm?”

Ai’s eyes go wide as her face gets drawn into the board like a magnet.

I don’t blame her.

Advancing the Pawn in front of the Bishop is one of the worst moves you can make. For someone that’s learned the “correct” way like Ai, this probably doesn’t feel like Shogi anymore.

I, however, have seen this before.

“*Kakutou fu*, huh”

“And what is that?”

I couldn't help but grin as Akira took off her sunglasses to give me an inquisitive glare.

Quickly wiping it off my face, I lower my voice and give her some details.

"It's a Ranging Rook style sneak attack. The full name is *kakutou fu senpo*, Bishop-head Pawn Strategy."

"Tofu?"

"Like I said, Bishop-head – Pawn. Panther moved the Pawn in front of the Bishop forward, yes? It's a move people normally wouldn't think to make."

Bishops have a round head—basically, it's that Pawn's job to protect the Bishop since it can't move straight forward. Moving it out of place for no reason exposes that weakness to the opponent.

If this happened over the Internet, the other player would think it was a miss click. That's how bad it is.

"My, my That was stupid. Guess there's nothing to do now but exchange Bishops before it's too late."

Panther sticks a finger through that overgrown broccoli head of hair, scratching while bemoaning the mistake and sends the Bishop forward.

"....."

Ai looks suspicious but takes said Bishop to complete the exchange.

Akira turns to me with a worried look in her eyes and asks, "What's happening? Is my lady in a favorable position?"

"She is. In a regular match, anyway."

"Meaning?"

"This is where *kakutou fu* gets interesting."

Ai keeps going like normal. In other words, I don't think she realizes what her opponent's miss click means.

All the while, Panther keeps saying things like, “Oh my, young’en, have you no mercy?” and “Not again! All these little mistakes are piling up like hot peppers,” and moving pieces around as if running away from Ai’s advances.

But that led to a strange shift on the board.

I’m not exactly sure when, but Panther is suddenly on the offensive after opening with a bad move and constantly defending for so long.

The tides have turned.

“Huh?”

The board was already favoring Panther by the time Ai noticed something wasn’t right.

“?! What, why?! What’s going on here?!”

If she can steady herself, hunker down and focus on the battle, there’s still a chance she could come back.

But Panther didn’t give her that chance. —Panther is good!

“Can’t tell if it’s an old man or woman by looking, but that playing style is reckless. Like a wild animal really!”

“What, what even is that?! What has that freak done to my lady?!”

“It’s a *ploy*.”

“Ploy meaning?”

“To be blunt, pulling a fast one on your opponent.”

“Does that violate the rules? If so, I know the perfect place to mount a panther head.”

“It’s not, it’s not! Ploys don’t violate any rules whatsoever!”

I start to panic as Akira reaches for something at her waist and move to stop her. As for what’s hidden beneath her suit, I don’t know and I don’t want to

know.

“... In that case, aren’t there better names for this technique than a *ploy*?”

“You have a very good point there. But then again, they didn’t get that name because of the user’s intent—more so how the victim feels when they fall for it ... Well, they don’t work on pros. If they did, that person has no right to call themselves a pro.”

And Ai Yashajin still isn’t a pro.

🏠 PERFECT SHOGI

In the end, Panther ended up beating Ai to a pulp five times in a row before she came back to us with the empty cigarette box tightly clenched in her fist. She stomped the ground in frustration the moment we left the Shogi parlor.

“How?! Everyone playing at the front were total pushovers!”

“Of course they were. They’re meant to draw in customers.”

“... How do you mean?”

“Places right on the road like this have *weaker players sit at the front on purpose.*”

“Why do that?! It just makes the place look bad!”

“What is the best moment in all of Shogi?”

“Huh? When you win, isn’t that obvious?”

Ai’s answer makes me grin.

I don’t know what I would’ve done if she said, “When locked in a close battle” or something studious like that just now. Probably just stared at her in disbelief. The two of us might have more in common than I thought.

“The best moment in Shogi is when you completely destroy your opponent. That’s true for the strongest pro all the way down to the weakest amateur. There’s nothing better than saying, ‘You could’ve had me here!’ during a review session after wiping the floor with some weakling. It’s the best feeling ever. That’s why everyone wants to feel that way. And that’s also why Shogi parlors like this one want *lots of weak players* to come.”

I point to a sign at the Shogi parlor’s entrance.

“It’s written right there in black and white: *Unranked pay half price for service.*”

“.....”

“Seriously. It triples their profits.”

It’s the same thing my Master does in his own classroom: lose the first game against new customers on purpose to give them confidence. He even made it so that he only lost by one move.

The only one he completely flattened in their first match was Big Sis, and that was only because her talent caught him off guard. Apparently he once said, “I thought she was goin’ for the kill. Thought I had to end it before she got me.”

He was an A ranking 8-*dan* at the time, but a four-year-old girl spooked him. Ginko Sora was that girl. What a monster.

“In a place like New World where lots of *shinken* players gather to beat up on weak players for pocket change, Shogi parlors employ lots of strategies to draw in the weaker ones that become their meal ticket.”

“... So, you’re saying I got suckered into it? Fooled by these people that hang around in this dirty place!”

Considering how much pride Lady Ai has, I’m sure it hurts, but five consecutive losses make her own weakness impossible to ignore.

She may be a bit cynical about it, but Ai is genuinely trying to learn from her

failure.

The losses aren't breaking her spirit, but rather lighting it on fire. That's good. It means this girl is a competitor after all.

"Your Shogi knowledge is outstanding."

Taking off my baseball cap disguise, I start talking to Ai while she shakes with anger.

"Very fluid, pristine Shogi. The way you learned how to play must've been effective. I can see those teachings in every move you make."

"F-flattering me now will do nothing——."

"But that's exactly why you fall into so many traps. You're easy to trick. Go just a little off the beaten path and you're not sure what to do next. Plus, you're easily distracted by an opponent's grumbling, provocations and empty threats off the board. Shogi skill isn't the problem, it's all in your head."

".....!!"

She probably didn't expect me to say that. Her shocked eyes are looking up at me.

"I'm not telling you to learn any ploys because they won't work in the pro Shogi world. Falling for them once is fine, just as long as you learn from your mistakes and never fall for them again."

The thing about *plys* is that you get a huge advantage if they work, but get completely stonewalled if they don't. They are an all-or-nothing kind of strategy. Basically, strategies that only work if your opponent makes a mistake. And those mistakes crack their spirit.

Ai's talent is defensive.

Being able to absorb the opponent's assault, bring it to an end and come back to win is considered by many Shogi pros to be the ideal playing style.

You must be perfect to win as a defensive player.

“That’s why I’m going to demand perfection from you, Ai. Perfect Shogi.”

“Perfect Shogi ...”

“I have nothing to teach you about the basics. You can learn the standards on your own ... But competitive tactics aren’t written in any book or match record. You can only learn them by playing against other people. That’s what I want you to get out of playing in the underground Shogi world.”

Wherever there’s light, there’s shadow. Wherever there is a public face, a world behind the scenes must exist.

Perfection can only be achieved by knowing both inside and out.

I’m going to show this young girl the dark side of society and Shogi. Rather than have her shine a theoretical beam of light on the board and search for truth in the game like with my apprentice, I’ll teach her the psychological side: the anxiety, worry and surprises that come with a live opponent.

I’ll teach her how to manipulate someone’s spirit with Shogi.

“If you do that—no one will ever stand a chance against you.”

▲ GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP AGAIN

“I’m hooome.”

I stopped by one of New World’s fried kebab places to pick up some food before going home. I was greeted by the excited voices of a few elementary school girls coming from the back of my apartment.

Mio’s head pops out of the *tatami* room as she calls out, “Ah! Kujuryu-sensei is back!”

The acting leader of their practice group, Mio Mizukoshi is in the fourth grade,

like Ai. Also she's my apprentice's first Shogi friend: she's a little ball of energy.

What's more, the two are in the same class at school. It's all thanks to Mio that Ai's move from the north coast was so stress free, and she's adjusted to Osaka so quickly. Such a good girl. Still she can't correctly pronounce my name though.

"Grade Schooler Practice Group."

It's a practice group made up of Ai and her three closest Shogi friends.

It's a simple gathering where the four of them come to this apartment to play Shogi two or three times a month. Unfortunately, neighbors started giving me strange looks and people say I have a Lolita complex (it's worse on Internet chat rooms) because of these sessions. It hurts.

But I'm fine with it! I don't care what they call me as long as my apprentice is improving!

The main thing is that all the girls here know that I'm not like that!

"Keeping your eyes on the board, everyone? I brought back a ton of kebabs, so dig in when you find a good stopping point——."

"Masta!"

Ahh, an angel≡

A golden, fluffy blur flies toward my legs as I lift the bag of kebabs out of the way.

Charlette Isoir, six years old now.

She's a mind-blowingly cute little girl who goes to a school for French kids in Kyoto as well as a Shogi classroom over there.

She may be a little behind everyone else in terms of Shogi skill, but she's a doll, tries really hard and is just so darn cute.

"Masta. Cha has a request for Masta. Okay?"

“Ah! Charlette——.”

“Wait, wait! We’re not done talking about it yet!”

Ai and Charlette’s guardian of sorts, Ayano Sadatou, comes barreling out of the room to chase down the angel.

Charlette is being surprisingly forward today. “Unf, ummf,” and making cute little noises as she tries to climb up my legs. Just what does she want to ask? She’s so cute I kinda want to grant her wish, no matter what it is.

“Master, to tell the truth Charlette, um

Ai is trying to say something, but it looks like she can’t put it into words. The look on her face is really strange. Besides being puzzled, there are some shades of anger and irritation in there too.

I set the bag of kebabs on top of the shelf by the door and pick Charlette up, holding her so I can look at the golden-haired angel right in the eyes and ask.

“What is it, Charlette?”

“Um, you see? You see?”

She seems embarrassed yet excited at the same time, like she’s about to tell me a big secret. Then, she finally says it.

“You see, Cha? Can Cha be Masta’s apwentice?”

Say what?!

“Charlette you want to be my apprentice?”

“Yep!”

“And, you want to live with me?”

“Yep!!”

She nods really hard in my arms. That smile of hers is so cute I swear it could melt right off her face. Such a little angel

I want nothing more than to give her a big hug, yell, “I’ll make you the happiest girl on earth!!” and take her as my apprentice right here on the spot. However, I come to my senses in the nick of time. Whew, that was close

Both she and Ayano go to Kayaoku 7-*dan*’s classroom over in Kyoto.

It would make a lot more sense for her to be her apprentice instead——.

“Ayano. What about Kayaoku-*sensei*?”

“For the most part, Master Kayaoku lets students do what they want.”

Like a machine, Ayano answers my question right away. She’s got a good head on her shoulders.

“She told us that she’d be happy to be our Master, but she’ll put in a good word for us if there’s a different professional we’d like to ask.”

“Well, that’s nice of her.”

“Very much so! I love my Master,” Ayano proudly declares with a look of love and admiration in her eyes. Just from that, I can tell Kayaoku-*sensei* is a very good teacher.

She’s also connected to my Shogi family tree, four generations to be exact. Currently a member of the Women’s League and the titleholder, she’s one of the best in Kyoto, and that’s saying something because many titleholders live there. She’s the leader of the pack, if you will. Then again, we have a women’s titleholder among us too (grimace).

But that’s not important.

“I can’t take you as my apprentice.”

“Wha?”

I guess she didn’t think I’d say no. Her whole body flinches and her eyes fly open in shock as if I had just slapped her across the face. And I could swear that a bit of relief passed across Ai’s worried eyes as she watched.

“Cha can’t to be Masta’s apwentice?”

“..... No. It’s not possible.”

“Why?! Why not?!”

She wraps her arms around my neck, clinging to me and asking “Why?!” again and again like a broken record. Those big blue eyes of hers are tearing up.

Her pure-hearted disappointment feels like a knife in my chest.

“You said yes to Ai, but why no to Cha?!”

“Charlette”

Ai heard everything, but the tiny voice that came out of her mouth sounded like she did something wrong.

Here’s the reason why Ai got a *yes*, but Charlette got a *no*.

Simply put: discrimination—the distinct difference in talent between them.

Charlette is still only six years old, but that’s not the issue. I mean, I was six when I moved in with Master to become his apprentice and Big Sis was four when she got accepted. Youth is often treated like potential in this world. It’s certainly a positive.

So, what doesn’t she have?

As of now: skill, the will to train and——talent.

I came to the decision that Charlette doesn’t have enough.

It’s said that skill is everything in the Shogi world. Without skill, you can never succeed. I can’t drag someone down this path knowing they won’t have a chance to succeed and be happy.

Of course, everyone has a shot. I might just be blind to her true ability.

If I started training her now, she could go on to be a big success in the Women’s League. I can’t completely rule that out.

But that's where I'm not good enough. Someone with Ai's level of talent and determination might be able to improve just by being around me, but

No.

Even with Ai's talent and determination, I'm still the truth is, I can't help her improve *on my own*.

"*She's getting worse.*" Big Sis's words that night killed my confidence.

"..... I just can't take you as an apprentice, Charlette."

I repeat myself.

But if I leave Charlette like this, that innocent spirit of hers will be forever scarred. And it won't just be Charlette, Ai'll be cut pretty deep too. Who knows what effect that'll have on her.

—I've got to find a way to avoid that at the very least.

I need to turn Charlette's request down and yet have her leave happy—is there even a way to pull that off?!

I read the situation for just a few seconds worth of waiting time and come up with a move that just might work ...

"I can't take you as an apprentice. But——."

"Bwut?"

Charlette looks up at me with big, watery blue eyes that could burst at any moment as I set up to hit this problem right out of the park!

"I can't take you as an apprentice, but I can take you as a bride!!"

Ai's eyes go wide, her jaw falling halfway to the floor the instant those words come out of my mouth. For some reason, Mio and Ayano are turning pale.

Meanwhile, Charlette blinks those big eyes a few times and tilts her head.

“..... Bwide?”

“Yep. Bride. My bride.”

“Cha, can be Masta’s bride?”

“That you can!”

“Wha≡”

She’d been on the verge of tears just a second ago, but now she’s happily rubbing her cheek against my chest.

“You see? Bwide is much better than awpentine for Cha!”

“Isn’t it?! So much better?!”

“Pwomiss kiss! Mwahh≡”

“Hahaha! Such a precious bride I have. But remember, not till after you graduate high school, okay?”

I joke around with Charlette, responding in kind when I suddenly feel my apprentice’s eyes looking right at me as if to say, “What the hell does that mean?!”

Hey, I’m good at dealing with spoiled kids.

Have a look for yourself! Now bask in the Dragon King’s resourcefulness and all its glory!

“Master *darabuchi*! Lolita complex!! Loli King!!”

Huh? This is a disaster.

“Offering to marry a little girl that just started elementary school, what are you thinking?! Pervert!!”

“J-Just calm down, Ai!” She’s right! Spitting at the heavens will just get spit in your eye!!

Mio and Ayano rush in to restrain my first apprentice. How did it end up like this?

Then again since I was so quick to turn down Charlette, it's going to be a lot harder to bring up Ai Yashajin.

What's worse, judging by my apprentice's reaction to this whole thing, she wouldn't be open to the idea of me taking another apprentice at all Actually she might outright refuse (me taking a bride even more so).

It's true that apart from being my apprentice, Ai lives with me. She's in a position where any decision I make about the living situation also affects her. Thinking about it like that, taking an apprentice or a bride without getting her permission beforehand might be out of bounds, maybe even dangerous.

Well, it's not like I'm taking Ai Yashajin as an apprentice anyway. She's just a short-term student, so that's fine right? Right?!

PINK PANTHER

With all that on my mind, Ai Yashajin's next lesson at New World took place the following Saturday.

"Looks like that Panther hasn't come in yet."

We're at the same place as last time, Twin Kings Club. The wild animal of a human being that beat Ai to a pulp using *kakutou fu*, wearing a leopard skin dress last time, isn't around, and I tell you, this whole place feels different. Even in New World, you don't come across someone with that kind of presence every day.

"So, what now? Should I play against you?"

Ai asks, but I shake my head no.

“Go issue a *shinken* match to someone that looks like they know what they’re doing. Someone in the back, you hear? Also, call me *Sensei*, got it? *Sen-sei*.”

Only newbies are up at the front of the Shogi parlor. Chances are that people sitting at the back without an opponent are so strong that no one wants to play them *shinken* style.

“Humph!” Ai mutters in distaste, but she does what she’s told and goes to find an opponent. After what happened last time, I’m sure she’s painfully aware of how good the people here really are.

Ai eventually found an old guy sitting in front of a Shogi board and reading a copy of *Shogi Weekly Magazine*.

She pulls out the empty chair and says, “Hey hey, mister?” Flipping her hair back over her shoulder, she leans in close to his ear and whispers, “Would you play with me?”

Wow, she could have worded that a little better ...

“.....”

The old guy peaks over the top of his magazine, slack jawed by the elementary school girl’s invitation. But once he saw the cigarette box next to the piece box and Ai lining up the pieces, he figured out it was a *shinken* invitation. He then folds up his magazine, plops it on the seat next to him and says with a smirk, “Should I leave out my Rook?”

“You must be joking.”

Not only did Ai immediately reject the old guy’s offer of a handicap, she picked up five of her own Pawns to do the Shogi equivalent of a coin flip to see who goes first.

“.....!”

The old guy glares at her.

Flipping the Pawns is the upper player’s job. Basically, Ai just countered his

I'm stronger than you taunt with the taunt of her own. An elementary school girl with guts like that? That's talent in and of itself.

Once the pieces came down, Ai got the first move.

"When you're ready."

Ai didn't give her opponent a chance to breathe before making the first move, confidently lifting her chin at the same time. She went with the Orthodox, opening the Bishop Path.

Now it's the old guy's turn.

"No crying when you lose now heh."

His move was—*4 Four Pawn!*



歩: PAWN 香: LANCE 銀: SILVER
角: BISHOP 桂: KNIGHT 金: GOLD
飛: ROOK 玉: KING

“?!”

Ai does a double-triple take and is unable to believe that he would do such a thing. Maybe she thinks that was a mistake?

The old guy grins.

“Here you go, have a freebie. Come and get it.”

“.....”

Ai freezes on the spot and tries to get a read on what her opponent is trying to do.

—Was this a handicap he was putting on himself after she rejected the proposal?

—Or was it a ploy?

I had to stop myself from whistling, seeing him make that move while I pretend to play Shogi with Akira.

“Haven’t seen that in ages. It’s Pac-Man.”

“Pac-Man?”

Akira adjusts her sunglasses, clearly surprised to hear a very un-Shogi like word.

“Isn’t that a videogame?”

“I think that’s where the name comes from, but it’s a kind of sneak attack.”

It’s where the defensive player appears to offer up a Pawn to their opponent, a strange strategy that makes it seem like they’re at a disadvantage no matter how you look at it.

But it’s a ploy that goes much deeper than that.

I use the board in front of me to show what can happen with Pac-Man.

“Should the offensive player take the bait like a Pac-Man chomp, the whole board gets thrown into chaos like this. Formations change at the drop of a hat, so the one who has spent more time studying has a tremendous advantage.”

However, pros can overcome whatever changes come their way. It’s safe to say that anyone who can adjust to this strategy on the spot has what it takes to join the professional ranks.

“Just out of curiosity what happens when the offensive player doesn’t take the bait?”

“The game returns to standard protocol. While that is an option——.”

I reset the pieces on the board and speak with hopeful expectation.

“As for me, I’d rather take it and go for chaos.”

I don’t know whether my excitement came across or not.

But Ai took the Pawn, snapping her Bishop down with authority. The old guy’s lips curled into an even deeper smile.

“Aw-ah, there it goes ... All right!”

Here comes the chaos.

In a battle where all the big pieces throw their weight around, one wrong move and the tides of battle can go roaring in the other direction and ultimately lead to defeat.

“Kh!”

Ai presses her palm against her eye, biting her lip as she makes a painful face and bears it.

But the old guy looks as cool as a cucumber. It’s because he’s already done his homework. He thinks all he needs to do now is follow the same pattern he’s been studying without thinking too much. That’s the advantage of this strategy.

Unfortunately for him, that look of comfort steadily disappeared with each passing move.

“What is with this brat?! Dammit! By now it should be ...”

It was because this little girl that fell into his trap refused to accept her fate and he kept falling into the traps she set for him. The old guy wasn’t just surprised: he’s in shock.

A fluke——no, it’s not. Ai saw everything coming.

“.....”

Ai kept her hand over one eye, but looked up at her flabbergasted opponent with the other in a paralyzing glare.

She must be getting information not only from the board, but from her opponent’s reactions as well. She’s the exact opposite of my apprentice who goes into her own little world in front of the Shogi board. Interesting.

Then.

“How about——this!”

Ai moves a piece with a high-pitched click.

Perfect.

Ai, perfectly absorbed, deflected: a strategy she'd never used before. Calm, collected, reading, acute senses and a strong will to win above all else made it possible.

"... Nice!"

I couldn't help but pump my fist in triumph under the table.

Perfectly absorbing an attack by itself can break an opponent's spirit. Think of it like when an enemy you can't inflict a single point of damage on shows up in an RPG: a role-playing game. Don't you want to throw down the controller? It's the same feeling.

"Tsk! Looks like this is as far as I go."

The old guy tossed a piece in defeat the moment Ai went on the offensive.

His defensive formation hasn't even been touched. In fact, you could say that the real battle was just about to start. But Shogi is a game where you lose the instant you think you can't win.

"... You're quite good, young lady."

"Thanks. I know."

Ai accepted the compliment with a resolute smile on her face. Once a brief review session came to a close, the old guy said, "Go buy yourself some juice," as she elegantly took the rolled-up one-thousand-yen bill and placed it into her cigarette box.

Akira looks at me as if *she* were the one that just pulled off the victory.

"He-he-he. Now that's what I call skill! My lady would never lose to any of the scum in this trash heap without getting startled by some outrageous outfit!!"

"I agree that her talent is on a different level. Yes."

There was never any question about that.

“However, it’s necessary for Ai to toughen up mentally so that she won’t get rattled, no matter what strategy her opponent tries or how bizarre their clothes.”

There was once a Meijin Title Match where the challenger shaved his head as a way to psych himself up in what would become known as the Cue Ball Match.

The Meijin at that time was so stunned by his opponent’s shiny head that he lost the first match. However, he came to his senses as the man’s hair began to grow back and eventually defended his title.

“That Meijin admitted after the match that if his opponent had continued to shave his head, he might’ve been in trouble. That should prove that mental toughness plays a large part in Shogi matches.”

“Actually, I would like to ask if opponents shaving their heads is really that shocking?”

I admit that it also proves that many players in the Shogi world are that sensitive.

“But, then again, it doesn’t really matter what your opponent looks like once the match gets under way?”

I realized what I was saying was a lie as the words came out of my mouth. It was because I couldn’t concentrate on Shogi for the moment—I caught a glimpse of the beast walking through the front door.

The Panther—had become the Pink Panther!

Ai spoke, more afraid than surprised.

“W Why is it a pink leopard pattern?!”

“... To get attention?”

The desire to become fancier and even more glamorous is in every Osakan’s DNA. The Panther must have evolved ...

“Anybody up fer a round? Made a killin’ at the horse races today, so I’ll take on anyone and their mother.”

“... I I will face you!”

Ai sits across a Shogi board from the Pink Panther. Her opponent gladly accepts and starts lining up pieces. Going right into battle, huh ... That grade schooler has nerves of steel.

But yeah, that pink leopard pattern dress ... Even those glasses have pink frames ...

“That’s not good. I’m too concerned about its gender to focus on the match ...”

“W-Well This this is training!!”

Akira’s voice is trembling, but nothing rattles her. This is one opponent not to be taken lightly.

“I’m gonna flip ‘em, ‘k?”

After thoroughly trouncing Ai last time, the Panther flips the pieces and claims the first move with an amazing stroke of luck.

Once again, Panther goes for *kakutou fu*.

Keeping her guard up this time, Ai doesn’t do the Bishop exchange, but it goes without saying that Panther was ready for that.

“Yeesh, cheeky li’l one. Comin’ with power, eh?!”

Since Ai didn’t go for the Bishop exchange, Panther advances the Bishop before strengthening the offensive advantage with the left-side Knight.

“Ugh!”

Closing the Bishop Path not only cut off her Bishop, but Ai also couldn’t deploy her left-side Knight. It’s like trying to fight with your left hand tied behind your back. That’s just what her opponent wanted.

But Ai won't break that easily.

Quite the opposite. Being forced into this formation stoked her defensive talent into a burning flame. With all those matches against tricky opponents under her belt, she's leveling up right before my eyes!

"....."

People start gathering around them. Their match is at such a high level that the onlookers don't say a word, only marvel at the jewel in front of them.

"You ain't half bad, girl ..."

Despite having the first move and an early game advantage, Panther's attack got cut off. That husky, tobacco-laced, genderless growl of a voice complimented Ai.

"Perfectly absorbin'," said the woman once called New World's Leopard. "My all-out offensive is no small feat!!"

Panther is an old lady!

Ai was so stunned by the revelation that her next move was horrible and lost soon after. Can't blame her though.

■ TELLS

"So What's new? How've you been?"

Back at home, dinner time.

Everything that's happened, Charlette the other day and with the other Ai at New World, has left me feeling like I haven't spent enough time communicating with my apprentice. So I took the initiative and broke the ice myself.

Ai didn't stop eating as she answered with a smile.

“I’ve been figuring out people’s tells recently!”

“... Oh?”

Not the response I was expecting, but Ai seems like her usual energetic self. Talk about a relief. I advance the conversation.

“What kind of tells?”

“Mio always makes sounds like “whaa” and “oof” whenever something catches her by surprise but suddenly becomes very quiet when her formations recover.”

“Ahh. Yes, yes.”

Making those sounds is a tell, an uncontrollable habit, that everyone picks up at some point while playing Shogi. Beginners usually keep it simple like “Ehh?” or “Oh yeah,” but more advanced players eventually start saying things like, “I see, I see to shining sea.” Mammoth!

“Ayano takes off her glasses, so she can’t look at me whenever she’s planning to do a surprise attack in the early game.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

A meticulous habit, sounds like something Ayano would do. Rather than worrying about her opponent seeing her expression, she’s making sure that she doesn’t get startled by seeing changes in their face. That’s adorable.

“Keika starts twirling her hair around her fingers whenever her defenses get weak.”

“Ah! Now that you mention it, she does do that.”

Everyone has these nervous tics. Even high-level players with years of experience under their belt have them.

That includes titleholders. Some might fiddle with their long kimono collars when the opponent makes an unexpected move or their hands might start

shaking, sometimes even start coughing uncontrollably when they see a path to victory. Even if they're aware of their own tells, there's just no stopping them.

That's the thing about people when they concentrate as hard as they can, habits start popping up without even realizing it.

As a competitor, it's important to keep a cool head and recognize these habits when they come up. As her Master, it makes me happy to see that Ai's perception has expanded beyond the board.

"Anything else? Find anything interesting?"

"Yes, I have."

She sets down her bowl and chopsticks to say, "Master rubs his pants with both hands whenever he's hiding something."

"Come again?"

My chopsticks clatter to the table. Ai didn't even bother looking at them, instead she keeps her eyes trained on me, observing ... Then, without blinking:

"Master what are you hiding?"

Holy crap, this is terrifying.

"Huh? Me? H-Hiding something?"

"You are, aren't you?"

"No, no, no, no! Why would I?! W-What would I need to hide anyway?! Not that I could if I wanted to, living in this tiny room with you——."

"You're rubbing your pants."

"Yikes?!"

I was! I had no idea! No idea at all!!

"You are hiding something yes?"

“.....”

My palms, they're dripping with sweat ...

My palms tend to start leaking when I get nervous, to the point that I once dropped a piece in the middle of a match. Therefore, I always wipe my hands with something out of sight to prevent pieces from slipping, letting my opponent know my last move was horrible and my formation is weak or when I'm about to go on the offensive. It started out as a way to avoid those mistakes, but it's become a habit of mine.

Only two people have ever figured that out, Big Sis and Sir Ayumu. What's more, they only figured it out recently, and I've been playing against them for years. To think that Ai would recognize it in less than two months ...

She's horrifying!!

“Please be honest with me. It's not too late.”

“Hm? You keep saying I'm hiding something, but it's really not ringing any bells.”

I somehow manage to sit up straight and play innocent, averting my eyes from hers to avoid getting startled again. However, my apprentice doesn't let up the pressure and moves in again. It's like she always knows the best move to make. This is intense!

“That's a lie. You're hiding something.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Master always looks up and to the right when he lies.”

“What?! I do?!”

“No.”

She was bluffing!!

“But you flinched, didn't you?”

That I did. I most certainly did.

I had been looking over her right side and was just about to look left to throw her off, but I fell right into that trap.

W-When did she learn this technique?! Aren't you growing up a little too fast, Ai?!

"...I'm not angry, so please tell me the truth."

I swear, there's a dark aura drifting in from behind her that's threatening to overtake me like enemy cavalry. I can hear the horses *twp twp twp* ... She looked angry from the start ...

"R-Really? You're not mad?"

"No. I'm not mad."

Then she says, smiling ear to ear.

"But I'm about to be."

Several hours later——.

After enduring every one of my apprentice's secret techniques and being put in check more times than I can count, I managed to get through the evening without telling her about Ai Yashajin.

B-But I think it took a few years off my life ...

A LESSON FOR BEGINNERS

"... Did you not sleep at all?" said Ai with a stunned face the instant we met up for her next lesson.

"..... I can't take anymore too much to explain just can't"

"Huh?"

“That’s not important, now go play! Take down the Panther today no matter what, got that?! I have my own life-threatening battles to worry about?!”

“W-What’s gotten into you? You’re making no sense at all ...”

Although a bit taken aback by my outburst, she spits out the words, “And I’m going to win, you don’t have to tell me!” before going to challenge New World’s Leopard.

Once their match gets underway, Akira and I are left on our own as always.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“... Um.”

“Yes?”

“We paid to get in too, so why not play? The two of us.”

“By play, you mean?”

“Shogi, of course.”

What else is there?

“But I don’t know much of the game.”

“I’ll teach you if you’d like. First, this is how you line up the pieces——.”

“That much, I know.”

Sounding a little peeved, Akira starts snapping the plastic pieces onto the board.

“Humph See? Perfect, like I said,” she says to me once she finished with a look of accomplishment on her face.

“Your Rook and Bishop are switched.”

“.....”

The usual response at times like this is, “Ah! My mistake,” or, “Oh, so they are.”

Akira, however, said this while slowly removing her sunglasses: “Don’t you get to choose which side they’re on?”

Holy

Freely choose where the Rook and Bishop line up?! Where did she come up with that?! New age or something?!

“Umm no, you’re not free to choose. The Rook goes on the right and the Bishop goes on the left.”

“Set in your ways, aren’t you?”

Akira voices her discontent but switches the Rook and Bishop to the correct spots.

“All right, let’s get started Akira, do you know how the pieces move?”

“Don’t take me for a fool. How long do you think I’ve looked after the young lady? I’ve mastered them all perfectly.”

Our match started like that, but broke down almost right away.

“The Silver can’t move to the side.”

“... But I want it to.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“.....”

“Trying to hide it from me won’t work either! Put it back and think of another move.”

“It’s defective. The rules are in the way. The Gold and Silver are too hard to tell apart.”

That’s a hurdle that all beginners must clear. The second one would be

differentiating how the Promoted Rook and Promoted Bishop move.

“Remembering the difference is impossible, so they should all be one or the other.”

“Please take that up with the association directly.”

“You are the Ryuo, yes? That makes you one of the association’s bigwigs, does it not?”

“I have no power whatsoever. Think of me more like a decoration.”

A titleholder’s authority is completely different from the power wielded by the association. I’m just one of many professional Shogi players and my lineage is just a tiny branch of the Kansai Association, which is overpowered by the one in Kanto. Having fewer people means less influence, and the icing on the cake was my Master relieving himself from the association window, which made whatever clout I had disappear like the morning fog.

“Please, don’t get hung up on it. Everyone makes that mistake at first and, just between us, pros mix those pieces up sometimes too. (ha-ha)”

“And they still call themselves professionals? (grimace)”

“Work with me here, will you?!”

Just to be clear, pros don’t mix up how Golds and Silvers move, except when deploying one or the other from their captured pieces back onto the board. Always double-check.

“Just remember how the pieces move, okay! Silvers can’t move left, right or straight back! Golds can’t go diagonally backward in either direction!”

“I can’t be expected to remember so much new information! I’m doing the best I can!”

Oops. I gotta be more careful.

Kids soak this stuff up like sponges, but remembering how pieces move is a

big hurdle for adults. We'll never get off the ground if she gets frustrated now.

It's an especially big hurdle for women However, there is a way to get her interested.

"..... Oh? But you see, Akira."

I take a deep breath, put a smile on my face and say in a lighter tone.

"The Silver is actually an elephant."

"Have you suffered head trauma?"

"It's just a metaphor! An example to show you how it moves!!"

I point out the directions a Silver can move on the board.

"Take a closer look! See? Like this!"

"Uh-huh."

"Its trunk and front legs stick out into the spaces!"

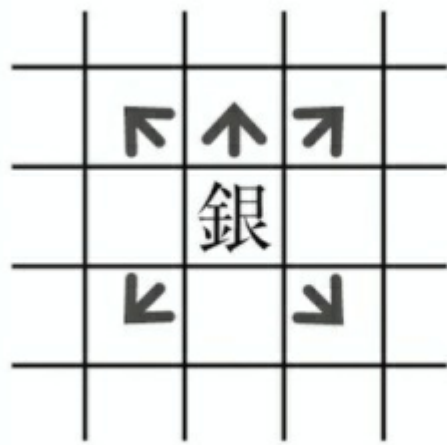
"Uh-huh."

"Now, doesn't that look like an elephant?"

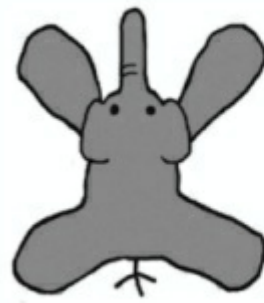
"... Are you sure you haven't suffered a blow to the head?"

"Just admit it, will you! That's obviously an elephant?!"

I've had it with this woman! This conversation is going nowhere!!



SILVER



ゾウ

ELEPHANT

“You’re the one that started talking about elephants for no reason. Bringing up animals in the middle of a Shogi game confused me.”

“I’m not the one that came up with that explanation. Actually, the Silver moving like an elephant has an important role in explaining Shogi’s roots.”

“Oh?”

“No chess piece moves like a Silver. There are however pieces in India’s Chaturanga and Thailand’s Makruk that do. There are ‘elephant’ pieces in Chinese Chess, Xiangqi, and Korean Chess, Changi, but they move differently. That’s why it’s theorized that Shogi originated in India and most likely came to Japan via Southeast Asia.”

There are other theories, but I like this one because the Silver’s movements are easier to explain this way.

“People trained the elephants in India and Thailand to fight alongside them in war. Since Shogi is a game based on war strategy, it makes sense that they would be included.”

“There are elephants in Africa as well.”

“Ha-ha, that there are. Then, Shogi could have originated in Africa, but the Silver still moves like an elephant. Don’t forget, el-e-phant!”

“You’re quite vocal like an elephant.”

It took everything I had to get her to remember that the Silver can't move side to side or straight back to get the match back up again. But we couldn't finish because she face-planted on the third hurdle for beginners: "Only the Knight can jump over other pieces."

Oh, and Ai got thoroughly destroyed by Panther five times in a row again today.

"... And it was going so well too ..."

Or at least she claims it was, so she's probably figured something out.

"My lady, we must leave now or else we'll break curfew. Let's be on our way!"

Akira ushers Ai along with a bit sharper tone than usual. I bet she's frustrated with Shogi at the moment, so I ask a question to get her to realize how much progress she's made today.

"Just one last question about how the Silver moves to review. What animal is it modeled after?"

"... A hippopotamus?"

Her face has "honest mistake" written all over it. We've got a long way to go.

■ CAKE

I trudge my way through the street at dusk on my own after saying goodbye to Ai and Akira.

I really should pick up something for my apprentice waiting at home But always bringing back the same kebabs would be suspicious. Heck, she's already suspicious.

"... Could swing through Nanba."

I usually go through Dōbutsu-en Mae Station, but I decide to go in the

opposite direction tonight. Nanba has got all kinds of things, and I can just go to Umeda if nothing looks all that good.

“But, yeah. What would make a grade schooler happy anyway?”

I haven’t got a clue, so I decided to consult with someone comparatively closer to a grade school girl, a girl in junior high.

I take out my smartphone.

Since there was a message waiting for me, I open it up to have a look. It’s from Sir Ayumu in Kanto, a picture with the heading: “Your thoughts on this garment?”

It looks like he took this picture of himself in a dressing room somewhere, posing for the camera. There’s a feathered robe around his shoulders. First a cape, now feathers

Personally, I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing that thing, but seeing someone else wear it is pretty funny. So, I typed an off-handed response: “Nice! Wear it to our next match (^_^)” and called it good. Then, I went into my phone history and tapped on Big Sis’s number.

“Yes?”

“Ah, hello? It’s me.”

“What?”

“You like sweets, right Big Sis?”

“... I don’t hate them.”

She sounds a bit cautious, but I press forward with another question.

“Are there any good sweet shops around?”

“Where are you?”

“Nanba. I’ll take the train to Umeda later.”

“Well let me think.”

She pauses for a moment, like she’s thinking back on something, before an avalanche of words comes through the speaker.

“There’s a place in Umeda, Shu Hatakeyama. Their ‘Fruit Overload☆Milk Crêpe’ is apparently making waves. The magaz the rumors say that the shop itself is perfect for a couple’s night out. Also, it’s pretty late but the Hilton should be serving their ‘Afternoon Tea Set.’ They’re pretty hard on the wallet but apparently their portions are big enough to have for dinner. If you’re around Dojima, Itodanidou’s roll cake is where it’s at. They have a few baked pastries that are good for a couple of days, but you can sit and look at the river and eat at the restaurant too. If you’re thinking around the association, there’s a place near the intersection in front of Shin Fukushima Station that serves cake with all you can drink coffee. It’s great because you can get on the train right away and they’re open until late. It’s not like I know so much because I want to go there and looked it up myself, it’s all these girly girls in my class that keep talking my ears off.”

“... But you know your stuff?”

“Hardly,” says Big Sis, as if she couldn’t be bothered to talk about cakes and pastries. “So? What’s this about? I just finished up preparing for my second match with the Women’s King for the day after tomorrow, so I could go for some sweets if you’re paying. I travel tomorrow so can’t do anything then, but I could keep you company right now——.”

“Nah, today’s lesson went a little long, so thinking of buying something for Ai.”

“Drop dead, *Kuzu*!!”

The conversation ended with an angry beep. No need to get all boiled up. What could I possibly have said just now that would make her tell me to go to hell?

All right, the closest one to here would be Itodanidou's roll cake?

I get directions from my phone and set off to pick up a surprise for my apprentice.

Buying two might be a good idea.

There's a certain princess who might need a peace offering.

RECORD 3

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan

PLAYER NUMBER: 175

BIRTHDATE: 11/1/1966

HOMETOWN: Osaka-fu

MASTER: (the late) Juzo Sakai 9-dan

RYUO MATCH: 2nd Class (1st Class—5 seasons)

PLACEMENT MATCH: B Rank 2nd Class (A Rank—8 Seasons)

TITLE HISTORY:

TOTAL TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	2 (Meijin Title Matches: 2)
TOTAL TITLES:	0 Seasons



🏠 TODAY, IN CLASS 4-2

“Kujuryu-*sensei* is acting weird?”

“Uh-huh

Kita-Fukushima Elementary School, in Osaka’s Fukushima Ward.

The school is in the same shopping district where Ai lives with her Master.

And in the fourth year, class two classroom, young Ai Hinatsuru approached her classmate Mio with a downcast look on her face in hopes of getting advice.

“How so?”

“... He started to do new lessons recently ... But I think he’s hiding something.”

Ai spoke as if the dam that keeps her worry at bay had broken. She unloaded everything at once.

“You see? Master says that it’s all old men where he goes to teach. But, you know? When I washed his clothes the other day they smelled like women’s perfume. And you know what else? He doesn’t wear a suit when he goes there, just regular clothes. And they’re fancier clothes than when we go out together. He comes home later every time he goes and he got scared when I asked him if he was hiding somethingSee, Mio? What do you think it could be?”

“A woman.”

That extremely confident declaration didn’t come from Mio, but the girl the top of the class’s social pyramid, Mihane.

“That happens all the time in comics and movies, and it’s always another woman. He’s cheating, cheating for sure.”

Mihane’s opinion held sway over every girl in the class. Her word was final. The other girls standing around them started nodding, saying “For sure,” and agreeing with everything Mihane said.

“T-That couldn’t be! Kujuryu-*sensei* could never get a girlfriend!”

Mio offered a counter argument to Mihane’s opinion.

Keeping an eye on Ai as the girl slipped even further into depression, Mio put power behind every syllable as she declared, “He’s not exactly the cutest boy, not even close! His fashion sense is horrible! And he doesn’t care about anything other than Shogi!!”

“.....”

“Ah! I-I didn’t mean it like that, Ai! I don’t think Kujuryu-*sensei* is uncool or ugly or anything like that?! But in general——.”

“That’s exactly my point. Men that can’t resist women fall for the weird ones so fast it’s not even funny!”

“.....”

“C-Calm down, Ai! You look like you’re about to kill someone?!”

“Huh?!”

Only then did Ai notice that her intimidating aura was making most of the girls around her cry.

Class 4-2 was on the brink of pandemonium for a brief moment.

“S-Sorry was I that scary?”

“Your eyes, they looked like they belonged to an assassin ...”

Ai had spent many hours in battles of life and death against adult men over a Shogi board. Normal elementary school girls can’t take that kind of intensity and end up crying.

Having been around Shogi players competing at the highest level, her aura was overwhelming. Mio, a full-fledged fourth-grade girl, nearly had an accident when she took it head on.

“... I’m really sorry, everyone. But, I’m fine”

“Really? Ai, are you really sure you’re okay?”

“Yep! Oh, and Mio?”

“Yeah?”

“Doesn’t your father work with medicine and stuff like that?”

“Yeah. Papa works for a pharmacy.”

“Do you know how to buy a truth serum?”

“... What?”

“Think my allowance will be enough?”

“Uh Umm? Ai?”

She was serious. Her eyes were burning.

Mio was utterly shocked.

Ai would surely drug Kuzuryu-sensei’s food at this rate. Should the current Ryuo’s blind passion result in an elementary school girl poisoning him, the Shogi world would come to an end. The tabloids would have a field day speculating about what had actually happened. The association’s darkest hour was upon them.

I-I must do something! I have to find a way to get her mind off this, because if I don’t ...

Mio thought about it as hard as she could and came up with an idea.

“Oh, I know! Why don’t we go to a different Shogi classroom today rather than the association?”

“In the city?”

“Yep! It will be fun to go someplace different! Have you been anywhere else, Ai?”

“I’ve been to Master’s Master my Grand Master’s classroom, the Noda

Shogi Center—but nowhere else.”

“There are Shogi classrooms all over Osaka! I’ll take you to the one where I started playing! We can invite Ayano and Charlette too! Let’s play until the sun goes down!”

“Uh Uh-huh.”

Ai couldn’t help but nod along with Mio’s infectious energy.

Master said that Osaka is dangerous That I shouldn’t play anywhere other than the association or Grand Master’s place without getting his permission first, but ...

Ai hesitated for a moment, unsure. However, she quickly realized that she didn’t have to be.

Because——.

Master is going places without telling me!

■ APPRENTICES

“What kind of place is this? So rusty.”

“Sh!”

I scold Ai Yashajin as she looks around the Shogi classroom, spewing complaints left and right.

She’s not wrong It’s just there’s no one here.

“We’re in the business district. Most of the clientele are office workers, so no one’s here yet.”

“Okay ...”

Careful not to make eye contact with the person at the front desk, I pay the

entrance fee and get everything set up as quickly as possible. Maybe it's because of my disguise, but no one recognized me this time either. I don't want to think it's because I'm just not that popular.

New World was closed today, so we decided to go to a Shogi classroom in Higashi Umeda for today's lesson but——.

"I've heard that lots of skilled amateurs who are good enough to appear on the national stage come to this place, but I should've known it would be mostly empty now on weekdays ..."

It's bright in here and everything is clean, completely different from our usual place But there's no point in coming to a classroom if no one is there.

"So, what now?"

"What the heck. Let's play."

"What? Then what are we doing here?"

"For the atmosphere."

I guide the rather perturbed Ai to a seat and start lining up plastic pieces on a heavily used Shogi board with all sorts of scratches and blemishes on the surface.

"I want to see how far you've come. No need for handicap."

"! I'm ready."

She made the first move and guided the match into a Bishop Exchange, making all sorts of intricate moves far beyond the average grade schooler one after another.

I take my time, thoroughly analyzing each move before going on the offensive and crushing her to a pulp.

"Kh! T-There aren't any moves left"

"Nope. Good game."

Once Ai forces those words out and admits defeat, I'm once again struck by how talented she is.

"But yes You've gotten better. I thought you would, but I didn't think you'd improve this much so fast."

"... What's that supposed to mean? Saying that after winning by so much. Sarcasm?"

"Far from it."

I force a smile and say, "It only feels like a lot because you're reading the board the same way I was. Let me tell you, elementary schoolers that can read the board like a pro are hard to find. Harder still, an elementary schooler who is good at defense——."

That's when it hit me, how strange those words were.

Yes. Children that can defend are unique.

Just like my apprentice, Ai, most children want to attack. It's just how they are ... So it's hard for me to believe that a kid who almost never played against another person would naturally become a defensive player.

Talent——. This quandary is too big to solve with just one word, but she most definitely has it.

"Ai, you Did you learn how to play Shogi from your parents?"

"... I did."

"What were they like? Were they really good at the game, perhaps?"

"....."

"I can't shake the feeling that I've seen your style of Shogi somewhere. Strong defense but it's not like the King is protected by a fortress. It's pretty rare for amateurs to pull that off while playing Static Rook And I hardly ever see an elementary school girl do a Bishop Exchange, even in Practice League.

Typically, that's what a pro would——."

That's when I noticed that Ai was looking down into her lap, as if trying to endure something during my rambling.

"Ah! S-Sorry. If you don't want to think about it, you don't have to say anything I'm sorry."

"..... It's not that, I can't talk about them"

Her voice is heavy, eyes still glued to her lap.

Now I've done it How could I be so careless?

Asking that kind of question is no different from driving a stake into Ai's heart.

She's a little girl, still in elementary school, and I asked her about her dead parents

"..... My mother, she was all right but not that strong, " said Ai, barely above a whisper. "But my father was the amateur Meijin."

"H-He was? Then he must've been amazing"

Still in shock at how badly I messed up, it took all I had to get those words out.

..... If he was an amateur Meijin, then there should be a record of his matches somewhere. I should check the old match records and Shogi magazine articles next time I'm at the association. I might find some answers.

Yashajin amateur Meijin While I know I've heard that name somewhere before, I couldn't bring myself to press Ai for any more answers and silently started a review session for the game we'd just played. That's all I could do, just move pieces around with her. Even without words, we can communicate our feelings as long as we have Shogi pieces.

Snap.

Snap.

Intermittent echoes bounced around our private Shogi classroom.

Our silent review session continued for a while, but once we ran out of places to review, Ai said under her breath, "... She's late. Akira."

"Probably having trouble finding a parking spot. And the streets around here make no sense"

"Maybe"

Then, Ai suddenly asks with vigor, "So, can you teach me how to move the pieces?"

"? That's what I've been doing."

"Not that way. I'm asking how to make that clean snap, *Kuzu*."

"Watch it. I'm your instructor, call me *Sensei*."

"Fine, fine, *Kuzu-sensei*."

Ai can be such a brat, but I can tell she is making an effort. Doesn't act like it But, she's a good girl.

"Like this, see? Hold the piece like this and like this."

Snap! A rich echo shoots through the air. Even a worn-out plastic piece like this can make that sound in the hands of the pro. Armatures sound completely different.

"Like this?"

Clink. That sound was adorable.

"At least try, would you?"

"I *am* trying!" Ai angrily snaps at me, her face bright red. "I'm trying but I can't press down because of the pieces that are in the way ..."

"Just put it down on the piece behind it."

"Huh!? Is that allowed"

"Pros do it all the time. Haven't you heard *sn-snap!* while watching a match or

during a replay before?”

“... It sounds like that?”

“Yes, it does. It’s because the player puts the piece on top of the one behind it and slides it into position. That’s why there are two snaps.”

“Okay then. Like this?”

C-clink. I don’t know how, but that was even more adorable than before.

“You are surprisingly clumsy.”

“I have a name you know.”

“Well, what should I call you? My lady?”

“.....”

She looks off to the side, mumbling under her breath, “... You can call me Ai.”

“Ah, that’s a no can do.”

“Huh?! I’m giving you permission to call me by my first name?! Who do you think you are, refusing an honor like that?! Trash! *Kuzu* trash *kuzu*!!”

“That’s my apprentice’s name! Your name, age and gender are the same!!”

“.....!”

Ai puckers her tiny lips and suddenly falls silent.

Then she asked me a question as she carefully searched for the right words.

“The Ryuo’s apprentice, I see. And what series of events led the Ryuo to come and take such an apprentice?”

“It wasn’t a series of events, more like a straight line. We first met at the title match, but I completely forgot about it. Then she showed up at my place out of the blue, and now we live together——.”

“You what?! L-live together?! Your apprentice is a girl, yes?!”

“A girl, but she’s still in elementary school. And yes, live-in apprentices are

rare these days but

“Heh, humph What do I care. I really don’t care at all!”

Ai made absolutely sure I knew she “didn’t care” before flicking her long black hair back and saying, “So? She’s good?”

“Very.”

“.....!”

“But, you’re better in terms of early game knowledge.”

For now—— I managed to swallow those words before they came out.

I’ve seen Ai Yashajin’s playing style up close and personal for a while now Her talent is on par with my apprentice.

Ai Hinatsuru plays offensive Shogi.

With an ability to read the board that borders on abuse, she charges her opponent and ruthlessly strikes them down in the blink of an eye. What’s more is that her amazing memory allows her to recall any pattern she’s seen before, even if it’s just once. Combining that memory with her reading skills, she can read faster and deeper into the match every time she plays.

On the other hand, Ai Yashajin plays defensively.

With sophisticated early game strategy and the ability to analyze the entire board in minute detail, she can steadily build herself up to a point as if it were second nature.

Plus, now that she’s polished her courage and gamesmanship by going to Shogi classrooms and parlors around the city, she can keep a cool head no matter what ploys or tricky strategies come her way. To be more precise, she’s learning how to use an opponent’s own moves against them. In other words, a counterpunch. Now that’s powerful.

If Ai Hinatsuru is the ultimate blade, Ai Yashajin is the ultimate shield.

Who'll come out on top when these opposites in terms of playing style and personality collide? I can't wait to find out.

I can't wait, but ...

"... How am I going to explain this?"

"Huh," I hear Ai say in a slightly apprehensive voice as I put my head in my hands and suddenly lean over the board.

Why did I lie like that back at the beginning? But my apprentice changes whenever I say another girl's name, becomes ice cold and she won't make any curry for me

"What if I tried like this?" *Kr-link*. "Hmm" *Clack*. "Huh? That's strange" *Click*.

"What?! You cut that out! I'm trying to think here, so would you please be quiet?!!"

"What's the problem with practicing Shogi in a Shogi classroom?!"

I snap at her, and she snaps right back at me. There's no one else here, so the guy behind the counter doesn't say anything.

"How many times are you going to have to make those weak clicks to figure it out?! It's like this!!"

I stand up and circle around behind her—.

"Grab the piece with your fingers like this."

"?!"

Standing right behind her, I wrap my right hand around hers. *Shudder!* Her shoulders jump.

Then, it hits me.

Her hand is tiny.

I always forget because she talks like an adult and plays a great game of Shogi, but Ai is still in elementary school.

One who's lost both her parents and only has her grandfather left. A very sad girl

"What should I do with my hand?"

"Oh. Yeah, like I was saying like this, okay? Just like this"

Snap!

It sounded like a kernel of popcorn just popped the board.

"... Got it?"

"Y-Yes"

I can't see her face since I'm standing behind her. Can't see her ears or neck either because her long black hair is in the way but her hand feels surprisingly warm under mine.

"I got it But one more time, just to make sure——."

"Hi there!!"

Then.

An energetic kid's voice shattered the tranquil atmosphere in the classroom, echoing back and forth.

"Mister, I brought some friends from school today! Are there two open tables?!"

"Open, heck, only one is taken"

"Yay! We've got the place to ourselves! Come on everyone, let's go♪"

"Thank you, sir."

"H-Hello"

"Thank you."

Even more high-pitched voices followed the energetic one.

All of them girls' voices.

And pretty young at that, tiny—— yes, elementary school girl voices.

I hear them coming in from behind me, chatting amongst themselves as they come inside. *Zing!* The floodgates open, releasing a river of sweat down my back.

“It looked rather small from the outside, but it’s bigger than I thought in here.”

“You’re right. And it’s so clean too

“Let’s pway lots of Shogi!”

Every single one of the voices sounds familiar. Actually I knew who they belonged to right away.

I knew but I didn’t want it to be true.

My body, however, reacted immediately. In addition to never-ending chills and a deluge of sweat, my knees start shaking.

“Is something wrong? Your hand is very sweaty.”

She looks up at me, eyebrow raised in suspicion.

I look like I’m going to cry, probably. She flinches the moment our eyes meet.

That’s when ...

“Huh? Isn’t that guy——?” one of the girls says in a curious voice.

Then I felt their gazes hit me like a truck.

I slowly look over my shoulder, neck creaking like a machine that ran out of oil, and see——.

“... Master?”

My apprentice was looking right at me.

🏠 MOMENT OF TRUTH

“It’s not what it looks like.”

Those were the first words to shoot out of my mouth.

My apprentice is looking at me, standing in the doorway of the classroom and slumping like a string-less puppet, all light gone from her eyes.

Her pupils are huge. Holy crap, that’s terrifying.

“T-This is work! Work that the chairman himself asked me to do, so I had no choice but to give this girl lessons. I had to take this job——.”

“Had to had to hold her hand?”

“I-I’m not!!”

I shove Ai’s hand out from under mine.

So here I am, my hands in the air like a bank teller during a holdup, facing my apprentice and unable to think out of pure shock. But I have to keep talking. I don’t think I’ve ever been under this much pressure, not even when forced to react to a move I didn’t see coming with only seconds to read the situation.

“I, I-I-I-I wasn’t holding her hand! She asked me to teach her how to snap the pieces down onto the board so I did what I had to do It was part of the lesson! I only touched her hand because the lesson called for it!!”

“Lesson?”

My apprentice said in a flat, monotone voice with her insanely dilated pupils locked onto me. She didn’t blink, not once.

“Master You said that your new student was a bald old man, didn’t you? I don’t see any bald people. And your student doesn’t look like an old man. That’s a girl, right? That’s a girl about my age, yes? And a cute one too, yes? Is

holding hands with cute girls part of your lessons, Master? Is that the kind of work the Ryuo does?”

“No, yes. Would you listen?”

“Why did you lie? You know that people only tell lies when they feel guilty, don’t you? It means they know they’re doing something wrong, so they lie, yes? Master lied when I said that I wouldn’t get angry so tell me what you’re doing with that girl, which means that Master definitely did something to make you lie to me about doing things like holding hands and being too friendly with another girl you liar, liar, liar, liarliarliarliarlairliar.”

“R-Really, we’ve only been playing Shogi! What do I have to do to get you to believe me?!”

“I will torture you.”

My apprentice’s declaration harkened back to the Middle Ages.

“Since Master won’t be honest anymore, I will get answers with pain and fear. It’s not something I want to do, but Master lies, so I don’t have a choice, do I? As much as I hate to do it, I’ll ask Auntie for help——.”

She’s going to tell Big Sis about this?! Don’t even joke about that!!

“H-Hey, Ai! Would you please say something! Tell her that this is just a Shogi lesson, as you have no intention of becoming my apprentice and——.”

“Ohhh? So, this ordinary, airheaded girl with a tooth missing is your apprentice, *Sensei*?”

“?!”

Ai Yashajin then steps right into my chest, more than likely on purpose, with a devilish smile on her face and starts stoking the fire.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Ai Yashajin. As you have seen, Yaichi-*sensei* has been teaching me all sorts of ins and outs. Isn’t, that right? *Sensei*≡”

“Ai Yashajin. Ai?”

“That’s right. So, we both have the same name. Is that a coincidence? Or is it perhaps He got bored of the first *Ai*? What a cruel teacher you have!”



No-no-no NOOOOOOOO! What the hell is this little brat saying?!

“H-He’s not bored of me! I’m Master’s whole world!!”

“Ohhh?”

The Ai standing against me runs her small hand down my cheek and says, “He seems to be head over heels for me now? He just said I’m better than you a moment ago.”

“Hey?! That didn’t mean——.”

“That’s not true! Master always says the food I made for him is delicious, and he said that I’m cute today!”

“Lip service, to be sure. He’s just making you do chores.”

“He cleaned out my ears last night after my bath! My head was in his lap!”

“It’s dangerous for children to do that on their own. He’s treating you like a child, that’s all.”

“Grrrrrrhhh~~~~!!”

“Ummmm, uh I-I shook his hand at the association’s classroom!”

“Why are you butting in?”

“I, I just want everyone to calm down, you know?”

Thank you, Mio. I appreciate you trying to come to my defense, but it’s doing just the opposite. If looks could kill, Ai’s eyes right now would be lethal

“Master has pushed me down when I was naked before!!”

“He what?”

Of course, everyone else’s heads snap around with a shocking claim like that. Ai Yashajin’s whole body froze like a statue.

“Masta said he’d make Cha his wife too.”

Then, lady Ai looks up at me with suspicion the instant she heard the angel’s



innocent claim, "... Could it be, that you have a Loli"

"Stop, stop, stop, stop! Everyone, stop talking right now! Cool your jets! Shut your mouths, please! And you, behind the counter! Don't move!!"

The man sitting at the front flinches; his hand hovering behind his back just inches away from a telephone. I'm onto you and I'm not letting my guard down!

"Okay I can explain what Ai just said. Back when she first came to my apartment, she forgot to bring a towel into the bathroom, and I bumped into her when she came out to get one, thus knocking her down ..."

Actually it was a desperate attempt to keep Big Sis from seeing that there was a naked elementary school girl in my apartment, but Ai Yashajin looked deflated after hearing my explanation and says, "That's all? An accident like that?"

"Yes, yes, yes! An accident! Just a simple accident! It's not like I'm completely interested in Ai's body

just transpired as she came into the classroom. I heard her, but I'm still in shock.

■ RAISING APPRENTICES

It's impossible to do a lesson like this. Once I explained the situation to Akira, I dashed out the door and made a beeline for my apartment.

"Ai!"

I yell my apprentice's name as soon as I get in the door. Then, I spot a memo sitting on top of the low table in the *tatami* room.

"I'm leaving."

"Seriously?!"

Tremors roll down my spine once I got a good look at what was written on the back of the print-out page.

She ran away?! She actually left?! I rush to check her stuff, but her backpack and school textbooks are gone.

"S-She she's really gone for good?"

Glancing outside, the sun has pretty much set. The thought of an elementary school girl wandering the streets of Osaka at night with nowhere to go makes my guts feel heavy, as if a whole lot of lead was coursing through them.

I have to get her back here, every second is a second too late. But where did she go? Where should I look? Who should I call? The association? Or the police?

Just as the guilt and an even stronger panic were building, my cell phone rang.

It's Keika. I hit the "accept" button and—. "Ah, Yaichi? Ai just showed up at

our doorstep

“Thank God! Oh, thank you, thank you! I’ll come pick her up right away!”

“You don’t need to.”

“Huh?”

“At least, that’s what I was told. That’s why I called.”

“D-Did Ai say that

“No. My father did.”

“Master said that?!”

“That’s right. He pretty much adores her. I think he wants to keep her around for a while. He’s probably lonely because both you and Ginko left at almost the same time. So, you don’t need to come pick her up for about a month——.”

“I’m coming right now!!”

I won’t listen to the nonsensical ramblings of a geezer. Cutting the connection, I run out onto the streets of Naniwa and flag down a taxi.

Once I got to Noda Station, one stop down the line from Fukushima Station, in less than ten minutes, I raced down a street, too narrow for a car to pass through all the way, to an old Japanese-style house at the end and burst through the door.

“I’m home!”

This is the house where Big Sis and I trained until a year and a half ago. I spent more than half of my life inside these walls, so it feels more like home than my parents’ place.

The silver lining in this whole mess is that Big Sis is out in Tendou City, Yamagata Prefecture for a title match right now. The match took place today, and it looks like she’s not back early this time. If she did make it back from that far away, I’d have to seriously consider the possibility that she’s not human.

“Ai! Are you here?! I came to pick you up!!”

I walk straight to the back of the house, open the sliding door to the *tatami* room, and see a stocky human shape appear, a shape that’s holding a teapot.

My Master.

“So, ya came.”

“Of course I did! Now, where’s Ai?!”

“Over here.”

Master waves me into the room.

I step inside, but my apprentice isn’t here. Just my Master, grunting as he lowers himself to the floor at the back of the room.

“... Where is she?”

“Ai said she don’ wanna see ya. So, I ain’t gonna let ya.”

“Master!”

“Calm down, Yaichi. Have a seat.”

“.....”

Master’s dignified words force me to bottle up my anxiety and obey. For me, a direct order from him is absolute.

Master starts pouring tea into cups as I sit on my ankles in the lower seat and he pushes one in my direction.

“Have a drink.”

“... Where is Ai?”

“No need to worry, she’s in this house. Playin’ Shogi with Keika in the kids’ room on the second floor right now.”

That’s the room that Big Sis and I used to share.

I want to see my apprentice as soon as possible ... But, it's a big relief knowing that at least she's safe.

With that out of the way, other thoughts suddenly start weighing on my mind.

Even if I went to her, I have no clue how to clear up this misunderstanding.

But wait, is it a misunderstanding? It's true that I never told her that I was teaching Ai Yashajin and it's true I said she was the better Shogi player.

If I went to see Ai now ... what could I possibly say?

Seeing the lost look on my face, Master quietly starts talking.

"I got a pretty good idea what happened ... I think. From everythin' that Ai and Mr. Tsukimitsu have told me anyway."

"From the chairman?"

"Whenever Mr. Tsukimitsu has a job for ya, he always gets my opinion first."

"I didn't know that ..."

That's the chairman for you. Even when it comes to making arrangements, he's the Meijin.

Professional Shogi players are all self-employed, and rivals at that. Anyone who considers throwing their hat into this world is horrible at working with others to begin with. It's necessary to keep that in mind when trying to work with people like us.

But, that wasn't all there was to it.

Master mumbles something deep under his beard before taking a deep breath and starting to speak with conviction. "I was gonna wait to say this until ya were at least A class but ... ya already have a title and took an apprentice, so what the heck. I was——."

He gulps down his tea and said something that I never saw coming.

“Ya see, I was gonna have Mr. Tsukimitsu take ya on as an apprentice.”

... Huh?

“Me ...? The chairman’s apprentice? What do you mean by ...?”

“I didn’t think I could raise ya.”

“... Because Big Sis was already here ...?”

Was it impossible to take on not one but two strangers’ children as live-in apprentices in this day and age?

That was the first thing that popped into my head, but Master shakes his head no.

“Because ya had something that I didn’t. Talent, to be blunt. Talent that blew others out of the water even.”

“.....?”

“I knew back when we played our first game. I knew that *this kid would be a pro no later than graduatin’ junior high.*”

“B-But, I had to have been, what, Amateur 2-*dan* back then? That’s long before anyone decides to try to go pro or not——.”

“I knew,” Master declares. “Actually, talent sticks out the most in beginners. Anyone can learn skills through willpower, but not talent. That’s somethin’ ya’re born with.”

“Talent ...”

“Ya felt it too, yeah? When you played against Ai.”

“..... Yes.”

Ai first picked up a Shogi piece three months ago.

The only opening move she knew was advancing the Pawn in front of the

Rook No skills to speak of, and no experience whatsoever, a blank slate.

However, Ai's Shogi was overwhelming.

Double Winged Attack, a full power play. It started off with a very unusual move, taking a Rook with the Bishop. From there, Ai used two Rooks and kept a pro's attack at bay. Even pros have a hard time with the Double Winged Attack, but she effectively played with two Rooks, a pattern that almost never shows up in match records.

Then she counterattacked in a way that I never saw coming. In an instant she realized that my offensive would come up short by the slimmest of margins. It wasn't out of reckless desperation either. She read the board in the blink of an eye and even set up traps: a truly ferocious attack.

How could this girl, who hadn't even handled Shogi pieces for most of her life, pull that off?

In a word—talent. That's the only way to explain it.

"I felt that the very first time I sat across the board from ya. Felt that *this kid could be the one to end Shogi.*"

—End Shogi.

Simply put, it means to understand everything that there is to know about Shogi. To find a sequence that guarantees victory. It's the highest compliment any Shogi player can give to another, and even has a divine feel to it.

Gulping down the spit in my mouth, I ask, "I-Is that true ...? For Big Sis as well ...?"

"I thought she could make some noise *as a Women's League player*. She had spirit and spunk in spades."

Master grins at me and takes another swig of tea.

"I was pretty sure I could turn ya into a pro. I could, but that's as far as I could take ya. I couldn't teach what comes after that."

“What comes ... after?”

“How to act like a titleholder.”

“.....!”

“How to prepare for a big match. Sealin’ techniques. Copin’ with matches that last two days. How to interact with fans, sponsors and the press as the face of the Shogi world, participatin’ in events, dealin’ with mounting pressure during winning streaks, how to remain in peak condition with all that kinda stuff goin’ on ... Playin’ as an ordinary pro is one thing, but competin’ at the top level is a whole other animal. Not just on the board either. Your day-to-day life completely *changes into another world*.”

I know exactly what he’s talking about Every fiber of my being can relate.

I went from being a bottom-of-the-barrel rookie pro all the way to the top of the Shogi world when I became the Ryuo. The sudden change threw me for a loop I may be exaggerating, but it really felt like my life changed. The changes outside of the game had the biggest impact on me. However, that impact affected my ability to play.

Actually it was those changes that got to me and I couldn’t win at all

“But ya see, I can’t teach ya what to do in that situation. I thought that ya needed to know how to act and how to prepare to be at the top while ya were still a kid, and I didn’t fit the bill. What’s more, I was worried that I’d waste yer talent by showin’ ya how to play my way. Many sleepless nights ...”

Master folds his arms across his chest and looks up at the ceiling.

“Should I sharpen yer skills, push ya out of yer comfort zone, or build ya up as much as I could ...? I didn’t know how to handle talent like yers. I didn’t have it to begin with, you see,” he said with a dreary voice. “So I went to speak with Mr. Tsukimitsu ‘bout the time you entered the Sub League. It was ‘cause I thought someone with talent like yers could raise ya right.”

“S-So ... what happened?”

“He refused.”

“.....”

Well, that’s a shock to the system.

“I’m gonna say this here and now: Mr. Tsukimitsu acknowledged yer talent. He didn’t reject ya as an apprentice. He refused because he thought it’d be better for ya to stay as my apprentice. I still remember his words.”

“What did he say ...?”

“He came to you with a childhood dream of becoming your apprentice. Please respect that feeling, treasure and nurture it.—”

Wham! The shock felt like I got punched in the head and a spreading fire ignited in my chest at the same time.

How an apprentice feels. ...

“That’s when it hit me. I thought I’d been doin’ all this for my apprentice, but actually I was tryin’ to run away. No, more than that ... I was jealous of this kid that had what I didn’t, and I might’ve been tryin’ to put space between us.”

Listening to Master’s words made me think back on what I had done.

Every decision I made was to help Ai. There’s no mistaking how I felt.

But then again, did I ever consider Ai’s feelings?

“Then Mr. Tsukimitsu told me somethin’ else: *The Meijin’s apprentice doesn’t necessarily become the next Meijin—.*”

Master looks up into the air as if basking in nostalgia.

“So that’s how it is, I thought to myself. And then faced it head-on ...”

There’s more to instructing than just teaching all the ins and outs.

Once you sit in front of the board, you’re on your own.

No matter who your Master is, you fight by yourself. You get stronger by yourself.

In that case, what a Master can do is—.

“That’s when I gave it my all, and managed to face the Meijin not once, but twice ... Never could claim the title though.”

Lead by example. Show the apprentice what it looks like to get stronger.

That might be the most important lesson of all. At the very least, it was for Big Sis and myself.

Seeing Master battle the Meijin.

Seeing Master wearing traditional clothes.

Watching him gallantly walk into the arena. Big Sis and I had no doubt he was the coolest person in the whole world.

Big Sis was so excited that she grabbed my hand and said, “That’ll be us. We’ll wear kimonos, for sure! For sure, for sure!” repeatedly like a broken record. There were nights when she couldn’t sleep and brought magazines and colored pencils over to my futon and the two of us lay sprawled out, drawing pictures of our future selves wearing kimonos. It even showed up in our dreams.

After that, when Big Sis was eleven she wore her first kimono.

And me, I got to wear a kimono when I was sixteen. I got to borrow the very same one of Master’s that I had idolized since that day ...

“I tried to run away from my apprentice,” Master whispered as if he were disappointed in himself. “Yer apprentice may have run away from ya, but everything ya did, ya did for her. So, I don’t think ya’ve done anythin’ wrong.”

“Master ...”

“You wanted to set up a rival for Ai, yeah? Someone she could get stronger with together. Someone like Ginko was for you.”

“.....!”

Heat starts building in the back of my eyes.

I was so happy that Master understood what I was trying to do. And just as happy to learn that he had walked down the same path happy that I made the right decision, and also reassured.

“Keika and I’ll take care of Ai for the time bein’. Ya’ve got nothin’ to worry about. So, give it all ya got!”

I take hold of the now lukewarm tea and wet my throat. All to make sure my next words came out loud and clear.

Then, I sit up straight and lower my head.

“... Thank you so much!”

Even so, my words weren’t as loud and clear as I’d hoped.

STONE DOOR TO HEAVEN

“Oh, Yaichi. So, you came after all.”

Master’s talk was over, but I still couldn’t figure out what to do about Ai. I’d been pacing at the bottom of the stairs for a few minutes when Keika’s voice came down.

She waves me up the stairs, so I head up as quietly as possible.

“We took a bath, and I dried her hair once everything was ready for school tomorrow. I just checked on her and she’s all tucked into her futon. Felt like old times.”

Keika used to do the same kind of thing for Big Sis and me all the time.

..... But damn it—Ai getting to take a bath with Keika ...

I'm so jealous I got to go in with Keika just once, way back when I was in early elementary school ... She was in high school at the time, but her body was well on its way to becoming the picture of divinity it is now ... Wait! This isn't the time to be thinking about that! What the hell am I doing?!

"What's wrong, Yaichi? You look a bit restless."

"Huh?! I-I, um ... Can't really say ..."

"To Ai?"

No, to you, Keika.

..... But I don't blame myself. Keika's skin is still glowing pink from the bath, and the shirt she's got on is thin enough to catch some glimpses of the holy hills. Whatever soap she used smells absolutely amazing and, though I may be the Ryuo, that doesn't change the fact that I'm a teenager with hormones ...

"I turned off the lights, but Ai might still be awake. Would you like to talk?"

"..... No. Now's not the right time."

The events of the day are catching up with me, I use the last of my energy to take a seat on the stairs.

Keika sits down behind me and gently strokes my head.

Her warmth, it's like all the tension and fatigue built up in my muscles is melting away, I can feel it ...

Back when I was living here, Keika would sit next to me on the stairs and comfort me just like this when I cried after losing to Big Sis.

I'm a lot bigger now than I was then, so she can't sit next to me anymore, but this feels just as it did back then.

It's like, as long as Keika is there to comfort me, I feel like I could recover from anything, no matter how bad it is

"... Did Ai say anything?"

“*Master is a liar!* She’s pretty hung up on that point.”

“I see

“So, you’re taking on a new apprentice?”

“I agreed to take on a new student on the condition that she wouldn’t become my apprentice. She’ll be the chairman’s apprentice, probably. I was hired to get her ready for the Practice League entrance test, nothing more.”

“What’s she like?”

“An elementary school girl, Ai’s age.”

“... It might be a good idea not to mention that to Ginko. Especially since she’s in the middle of title matches

“Oh yeah, how’s that going?”

“I think it just ended.”

“Just ended? Really? Ryou really hung in there.”

Both of us knew who won without saying another word. Big Sis did: no ifs, ands or buts about it.

“Hung in ... It might be better to say Ginko didn’t give her a chance to surrender ...”

“?”

Keika didn’t say another word but pulled out a smartphone instead. She hands it to me and I look at the screen.

It’s the record for the match. Judging from the first moves——.

“Ryou used *anaguma*?!”

The words fell from my mouth in surprise.

Anaguma kakoi is a playing style where the player moves their King to the very corner of the board and builds a rock-solid defense around it. Ryou

Tsuyomizaka is known for ignoring defense altogether and attacking head on (her nickname is the Aggressive Archangel for a reason). So this is the last strategy I'd expect the Women's King to use. Actually it's much more fitting for her friend and rival Yamashiro Ouka—Machi Kugui (aptly nicknamed Machi the Tormentor), who is really good at it.

The two of them go against each other in league matches and quite a bit for practice, so Ryou is always the one trying to break through an *anaguma*.

Since it's not impossible for her to use it herself, this was probably Ryou's ace in the hole that she was keeping warm for a special occasion.

And she pulled it out to use on Big Sis—however ...

"The formation was just fine, but Ginko completely ignored it and instead took all of Miss Tsukiyomizaka's offensive pieces one by one."

"Ouch"

We call that Burning the *Anaguma*. She was the one that was tormented.

"That's one way *anaguma* users tend to lose, but to have it happen during the title match Yeah."

"All that preparation and pulling out her trump card, but not being allowed to give up when all was lost like that"

Reading further and further into the match record, Ryou's pieces start dropping like flies and Big Sis's piece stand fills up and starts to overflow. The *anaguma* defense was left untouched, sad and alone.

Then came the time to surrender.

There's a comment next to the record that says that once Big Sis took Ryou's last offensive piece, she said, "*My piece stand is full, so I'll put it on the tatami mat.*"

Ryou surrendered as soon as she saw that happen.

Misery. That one word says it all.

Someone uploaded a picture of the scene just after she threw in the towel on the match blog. It showed Ryou sitting next to the board in a full kimono, with her head clutched between her knees. Pure sorrow. Her spirit is broken. Hopefully it doesn't carry over into the third match ...

"But this is cruel. Like, inhumanely cruel"

"It's almost like something outside the match got under her skin and she needed to vent. She doesn't go this far unless something other than Shogi was on her mind. That's the thing about Ginko: her emotions come out on the board when she plays."

"Just not on her face, right?"

"Wasn't she like this when she played against Ai?"

"Oh yeah ... She went right for the spirit then too ..."

Keika then spoke as if trying to find the right words. "Yaichi ... You didn't do anything to irritate Ginko, did you?"

"Do you think I have a death wish?! Seriously, Big Sis turns into a grumpy bear just coming out of hibernation before matches. I'm too scared to get close."

"That's what I thought ..."

"And I'm doing what I can to help her out in my own way. I'm staying out of her hair by not contacting her during title matches so she can focus. Even if I do need to say something, I keep it as short as possible, you know? Aren't I the best little brother apprentice in the world? It wouldn't hurt you to compliment me more, Keika."

"Yes, yes, the best, the best."

"That's all?!"

Keika tilts her head to the side, mumbling, "Now why doesn't it cross your

mind that that's when she could use some company?" with a slightly confused look on her face. Why? Because bears coming out of hibernation devour everything in their path, yes? That's why it's best to give space, yes? What other option is there?

"If that's the case, I've only got one other idea."

"And that is?"

"Yaichi, you've been secretly seeing Miss Tsukiyomizaka, haven't you? I wonder if Ginko is having a hard time dealing with that."

"Secretly? All that happened was I talked with her and Machi in the association's Player's Room. That's it."

"Now I see. Miss Kugui too ... That's why Ginko is twice as angry! Miss Kugui is at the match to provide commentary."

"???"

Why would Big Sis be angry at Ryou and Machi? Could it be because they made her wear that bunny outfit for the Women's League Fan Club event?!

But, I'm sure she wore her sailor style school uniform on that day. She wore it because it was determined that the fans wanted to see her in the uniform rather than a bunny costume.

"Don't make Snow White wear such a thing!"

"She can wear a bunny suit anytime, but her days in the school uniform are running out."

"Then again, mature ladies in school girl outfits are more"

These are just some of the things the fans had to say. Got to give the fans what they want, after all!

"Well, all the dots connect if you think about it that way but I think that Ginko was sending a message to the two of them by tormenting Miss

Tsukiyomizaka as she used Miss Kugui's favorite strategy right in front of her, saying 'I'll teach you what happens when you try to take what's important to me.' It does sound like something she'd do ..."

What's important to Big Sis?

Oh, her titles. It's true that she'll get a considerable advantage if she plants the seeds of doubt in her challengers' heads by breaking their spirits. Thoroughly dismantling one opponent will put everyone on notice. That'll send a message for sure.

"But for this kind of off-the-board tactic to be the only way she can express herself That poor girl!"

Keika mumbles something strange and wipes the corner of her eye.

"Anyway, Yaichi. Could you stop meeting those two girls behind her back? Ginko will never calm down at this rate."

"Say what? Why does me talking to Ryou and Machi bother her that much? I don't get it. We're basically coworkers, so of course we'll bump into each other."

"..... Haaaaaaa~" Keika lets out a long, extremely deep sigh before poking me in the cheek.

"Try to understand this. Things are going to get really bad if you don't turn over a new leaf real soon. This whole problem with Ai started because you're so loose with other girls. To be blunt, your lack of standards brought this on."

"W-What does that have to do with this——?"

"Quite a bit," she says, twisting her finger deeper into my cheek.

You are the one I love the most, Keika, it's always been you Please! Understand how I feel!!

"Let me put it this way, Yaichi. How would you feel if I went out for tea with a man you didn't know?"

“I’d punch a few teeth out to start with!”

“That’s what this is about.”

Ah, now I get it.

Even I can understand after having it put that way.

Ai must idolize me like the picture-perfect big brother. Someone like what Keika is to me.

No matter what the truth is, I realize that me simply teaching another girl Shogi behind her back was enough to hurt Ai’s feelings.

Not logically, but how she feels in her heart.

Since it’s not logical, it can’t be understood. Wow, feelings are complicated

“It’s just like Shogi.”

“Yep, like Shogi.”

I know it’s a puzzle that can never truly be solved. But, that doesn’t stop me from trying. Feelings and Shogi are a lot alike Then again, we compare everything to Shogi. It’s because that’s all we know.

“Hehehe,” Keika gently laughs and places her hands on my shoulders to help her stand.

“You want to spend the night?”

“Nah. I’ll go home.”

I stand up too.

Then, I stop in front of the sliding door to the room where Ai is sleeping.

“Ai.”

I say through the door.

“You might not believe me right now. But you’re what’s important to

me.”

I put what I was feeling in my heart into words.

There was no answer. Ai might be listening. Then again, she might already be asleep.

But, I put my heart out there.

I left Master’s house believing that somehow she understood.

On the way home.

Make sure you call her today. Not a message over social media or a text to her phone, but an actual phone call! Even if Ginko doesn’t pick up the phone, leave a message. Do not forget, promise?! Promise me?!

Since Keika was so insistent, I take out my phone and start dialing Big Sis’s number once I left the station.

“..... I really don’t think she’ll pick up but, okay.”

The match itself ended a few hours ago, but the competitors have to stay in the arena to interact with fans and talk with reporters, so they’re pretty busy. There’s also an after-party.

“Knowing her when she’s like this, there won’t be a review session but ... Oh?!”

Surprisingly, my call went through practically the second I touched the *call* button.

It’s almost like she already had the phone in her hand. Maybe she was reading something?

“What?”

“Big Sis? I just heard you won the match.”

“So?”

“I, um wanted to be the first to say congratulations.”

Keika flat out demanded that I say it like this, so I did.

“.....!!”

I heard something like a gulp on the other end. Then——.

“..... Th Thanks”

Her response was barely louder than a mouse. Sounds like she’s actually happy.

“Oh, and Big Sis. There’s something I wanted to ask you”

While I’ve got her on the phone, I explained that one of the kids I’m teaching played like someone I’ve seen before but I can’t quite place it and ask for her opinion.

“It’s a defensive style, but rather than keeping the King under lock and key, they strike a good balance between a thin defense and a strong attack. Do you know any pros who do that with a Bishop Exchange?”

“Yes.”

“You do?!”

“But I’m not telling.”

“Huh?”

“.....Yaichi, you jerk.”

Click. She hung up on me.

Just when I thought she was in a good mood, she gets angry at the drop of a hat. I can’t figure it out.

“... Just like Shogi,” I quietly whisper under my breath, looking up at the sky as

I approach my apartment.

OSHII

RECORD 4

RYUC

AKIRA IKEDA

AGE: 20

HOMETOWN: Osaka-fu

SPECIALTIES: Taking care of lady Ai

Marksmanship

Shogi (13-kyu)

FAVORITE THINGS:

The smell of lady Ai's hair

The smell of lady Ai's clothes



▲ COMPLETE

“Come to get whooped again? Yer tiny, but ya got more spunk than most.”

Ai didn't respond to Panther's taunt when we arrived at New World's Shogi parlor and she starts lining up her pieces with beautiful snapping sounds. She must've been practicing at home after that day because the sound has definitely changed.

But that wasn't all that changed.

“Just watch.”

Ai whispered to me just before we came inside.

“Because I'm winning today.”

Those words had an odd ring to them.

It wasn't that she was trying to psych herself up—more like she had seen the future and knew that she was going to win.

Once the pieces were flipped, Ai was put on the defense. Panther started the mind games with a light verbal jab.

“Ya sure? Ya can have the opening move if ya want?”

“I don't mind,” said Ai, cool as a cucumber as she switched the chess clock on. “The second move is more convenient for me.”

“?”

Panther donned the look of a cautious carnivore encountering a new animal for the first time, but slowly opened the Bishop's Path in the end.

Ai responded in kind as Panther advanced the Pawn in front of her Bishop, per usual. Just as I thought, she's using *kakutou fu* again. Ai doesn't look the least bit surprised.

It was Panther's turn to do that.

Because Ai *took Panther's Bishop with her own on the next move.*

"! She initiated a Bishop Exchange On defense?!"

That move sent a shockwave through the gallery.

"O-Oi, *Sensei*?! What's going on?! Why is everyone up in arms?!"

"..... Your lady *just passed on her own turn.*"

Akira yanks at my elbow in surprise and I give her a very general explanation. I doubt she'd understand how shocking this is if I went into detail.

Kakutou fu is a well-known ambush strategy. So well known, in fact, there are many counter strategies to deal with it. However, I've never seen this one. Thinking about it logically, that move doesn't give any kind of advantage at all—puts her at a disadvantage actually. That's what that move does.

Even so, Panther's face turns paler with every move thereafter.

"Ugh?! Why in the heck?! How? It ain't supposed to go like this?!"

While Ai made every move with natural precision, Panther began to doubt her own. Even her hand seemed heavy, clumsy.

Unable to figure out what Ai was after, she didn't know what moves to make.

"There's no way! That scatterbrained strategy shouldn't work, not in a million years! B-but somehow Somehow I'm losin'?!"

I get why Panther is growling like that. She hasn't made any mistakes Then again, this isn't that level of a match anymore. It's not as simple as keeping up the attack.

Ai has created chaos on the board, so much so that her opponent *can't tell the difference between a good move and a bad move.*

An unidentified strategy creeps its way across the board.

It's like—an imposing darkness.

“..... I'm spent! Ain't nothing left I can do!” said Panther, throwing in the towel as the rest of the parlor watches in awe.

“Whoa!” Voices stir in the crowd. In that moment, the crown of the wild was passed to a new owner.

Panther vigorously scratched at her scalp beneath her full head of permed hair, a sour look on her face as the two started a review session. It goes without saying that they're talking about the move that Ai passed on.

“And here I thought ya were tryin' to throw me for a loop Girl, ya're quite the competitor.”

“Maybe I am.”

Ai brushed off Panther's compliment like it was nothing, but I could tell.

She wasn't trying to simply shock her opponent.

That was no cheap trick. The Shogi match that took place on that board was much deeper and only part of a much bigger plan. Even if amateurs couldn't tell, a professional like me definitely could.

“..... She's ready,” I mumble to myself, knowing that our lessons have come to an end.

She has a potent imagination and the skill to bring it to life on the board. The final piece she was missing, mental strength that comes from playing against other people, has fallen into place. Now that those two are working together, her Shogi is complete. Her talents now cast a massive dark shadow over the board: that's her Shogi style.

Looking at the completed Ai, I have no doubt.

This girl, just like my apprentice, was blessed by the Shogi gods.

MASTER AND APPRENTICE CONTRACT

The following weekend. The Practice Leagues regular activities day.

Sensing that time was now, I brought Ai Yashajin to the main office at the Kansai Shogi Association.

“Nervous?”

“Hardly.”

She already has a pretty face, but dressing head to toe in black makes her stand out like a sore thumb at the association. Walking through, I thought I could hear whispers saying, “The Ryuo’s brought another little girl in,” and “So it’s true, the guy really has a thing for,” but I’m sure it was all in my head.

And Ai isn’t getting attention just because of her looks.

Personally trained by the Ryuo, she’s about to become the Eternal Meijin’s apprentice.

How could anyone like that not be the center of attention? I heard one staff member who was particularly on the ball mutter, “Should I get her autograph now?” That may have been a joke on one hand, but not entirely.

“Now then, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Miss Yashajin will participate in the Practice League activities starting today. The supervisor, Kuruno-*sensei*, has already been informed.”

“Thank you.”

Arrangements for Ai’s entrance test have already been made and it was set up so that she could join the Practice League activities as soon as I gave the green light.

All we have to do is finish the necessary paperwork before the Practice

League gets started.

“Just to confirm, Chairman Tsukimitsu will be registered as her Master, correct Ms. Oga?”

“Yes. One has made it so.”

I ask so as to make sure and the chairman’s secretary Sasari Oga answers.

Finally, I turn to the girl about to become his apprentice and ask for the last time.

“You don’t have any complaints about Chairman Tsukimitsu, right? Just as you wanted, he’s in A Class Pro and even holds the title of Eternal Meijin. I don’t even deserve to be mentioned in the same breath.”

“.....”

“What’s wrong? I’m not good enough for you, right?”

“.....Yes. That’s right.”

She glares up at me and unloads everything at once.

“You’re just a C-2 class player who was lucky enough to claim a title out of sheer luck, whose winning record has dropped below thirty percent, the trash *Kuzuryu*! How could the likes of you be worthy enough to be my Master?! Don’t ask such obvious questions!! *Kuzu!!*”

“Y-You don’t pull any punches, do you?”

Well, it’s all true so I can’t say anything back.

“That person is fine. A Master is just a name on a piece of paper after all.”

Ai answers, talking as if she outranked me. This brat is a real piece of work, but all talented kids are that way. So, that’s a positive in the Shogi world. Even the people in the room have looks on their faces like “Just what I’d expect from the chairman’s future apprentice.”

Then everything was signed—Ai Yashajin officially became part of the

Tsukimitsu Shogi family tree.

“So, you’re the chairman’s apprentice,” said Ms. Oga as she stared down at Ai.

“You can refer to one as Mrs. Tsukimitsu if you wish.”

“Huh? Why?”

Well, she’s on high alert.

“I don’t know about all this chairman and Eternal Meijin and whatnot—but why isn’t he here to greet me in person?”

“Probably because he doesn’t want to run into me. We’ve got a league match coming up.”

No matter how nice and friendly two players are, they do their best to avoid each other before matches.

They stop participating in practice groups until the match is over, keep it to a quick “hello” if they happen to see each other at the association and stay at opposite sides of the room if they’re at the same dinner or party.

That’s what matches are to pro Shogi players.

Relationships, lifestyle, work All of them revolve around Shogi. Ms. Oga looks at me and says, “The chairman asked me to deliver a message to you, Ryuo. *I thank you for your efforts thus far. However, I plan on playing at full strength during our match so don’t hold this against me.*”

“Sounds just like him.”

A diversion But not quite. He’s probably trying to prevent me from getting a little too motivated before the match. This will be our first league match. Even my competitive juices are flowing.

“Please deliver my response to the chairman. *You did so much for me ever since I started training, so it’s about time I show you my gratitude.*”

Yes. For me, this is a gratitude match.

Because I'm playing against someone who very nearly became my Master.

▲ LITTLE DEVIL ON THE SCENE

"This is Ai Yashajin. She'll be taking the entrance test today."

Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan* introduces Ai as the Practice League activities were starting to get underway. She lifts her chin up, looking around the room as if she owned the place as he introduced her.

"She's a fourth year elementary school student from Kobe. Also, Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan* is her Master.

Zing!! A shockwave blasts through the members of the Practice League all sitting side by side.

The very fact that she was the association chairman's, the Eternal Meijin's apprentice meant she had that much potential.

The air in here is electric, like when a strong rival first shows up.

Then I spot my apprentice sitting in the very corner of the arena. Seeing her for the first time in a while, and looking happy at that, my eyes hover on her for a moment but——

"!!"

She spots me, her big eyes opening even wider before, "..... (Humph!)"

She's still angry

An apprentice showing her master an angry puffy face. Quite the shock. One hit and my spirit feels like it's going to snap.

But there, in her hand——.

“Isn’t, isn’t that The fan I gave her?”

The one I gave her on her own entrance test day, the one with *Courage* written on it is tightly clasped in Ai’s tiny hand. It’s like she’s saying she can’t completely sever the bond we have My spirit recovers in the blink of an eye, seeing my resolute apprentice warms my heart. She’s—she’s so cute!!

What’s the Ryuo doing rejoicing over this grade schooler’s slight gesture? I snap at myself, knowing full well how pitiful it is. But I don’t blame myself for worrying about how she feels. What I’d give to be able to open her little heart and read her like a book Am I sick?

“Do you think Ai’ll forgive me? You think she’ll still call me Master? Or do you think she’s completely done with me? Hey, Akira, what do you think? Hey, come on, tell me.”

“Ugh T-This is too nerve-racking! I-I can’t watch!”

Akira came here to act as Ai Yashajin’s legal guardian, but she’s in rough shape. Both hands are clamped over her ears and she’s got her eyes shut tight (no sunglasses of course, we’re inside the association). She reminds me of what Big Sis is like when she rents horror movies and watches them in a dark room, even though she hates being scared. But that’s the only time she looks cute to me. She squeals in fright, grabs hold of my arm, that sort of thing. If only she’d always watch horror movies.

“Speaking of which, looks like Big Sis isn’t here today. That’s a relief.”

She showed up at my apprentice’s entrance test as an examiner, but she’s in the middle of the title match right now. She wouldn’t have time to be bothered with someone trying to join Practice League. Talk about luck.

So, I thought this entrance test would go off without a hitch but——.

The test taker herself destroyed that possibility right off the bat.

“Is this a joke? Why do I have to play against the league doormat?”

The moment that Ai learned that her first opponent during the test would be the Practice League's lowest ranking member (F2), she immediately voiced her displeasure to the one in charge, *Kuruno-sensei*.

Of course, this ticked off every other member of the Practice League, turning the atmosphere sour.

Everyone in here plays against each other all the time, meaning everyone's bonds are tight. Insulting one like she just did is the same as picking a fight with all of them.

"This isn't worth my time. Could you put me up against a stronger opponent?"

Apparently, *Kuruno-sensei* got a kick out of Ai's request and responded with a hint of irony in his voice.

"Well, you seem quite confident."

"I am. Confident enough to take on a Women's League player here and now."

"Well, in that case all you have to do is keep winning. You only need to win thirty-nine times in a row starting now and you can join the Women's League. Or perhaps you aren't quite that confident?"

"! I see. Fine then."

"Nh. That's a good girl. Now, let's get started."

That's *Kuruno-sensei* for you. As a Ranging Rook player, he can make decisions on the fly, a handy skill when it comes to handling bratty kids. If it were me up there, I'd have gotten into an argument and lost for sure.

A little boy in elementary school was assigned to be Ai's first opponent. Since he's F2, I'd say he's comparable to an amateur 2-*dan*.

Once the pieces were flipped, it was determined that Ai would go second.

"When you're ready," each said.

Once greetings were exchanged, the boy opens the Bishop Path for his first move and Ai follows suit. Next, he advances the Pawn in front of his Rook and the match progresses along the orthodox early game strategy Or at least I thought it was.

Because on the fourth move, Ai flicks the *Pawn in front of her Bishop* forward.

“*Kakutou fu* on defense?!” I whisper without realizing it as I keep a close eye on the match.

By and large, *kakutou fu* is an offensive strategy. Ai has faced it many times before, whenever Panther was on offense. She must’ve figured out a way to use the *kakutou fu* strategy while on defense.

“.....?”

The little boy playing against her clearly doesn’t know what to think. His eyes keep darting between Ai’s face and the board, the look on his face saying: *Did you mean to do that?* He kind of looks sorry for her actually.

A nice, honest boy But kids like him have a hard time in this competitive world.

Sure enough, he played right into her hands and was forced to surrender in the blink of an eye.

“I I lost?”

He tilts his head back and forth trying to come to grips with what just happened. I don’t think he knows where things went wrong, pretty sure he’s thinking he made a bad decision once the ambush started but It’s not that simple.

“S She’s overpowered. Yeesh”

Once again, Ai’s talent astounds me.

That wasn’t a simple ambush arrangement.

Not only has Ai acquired an in-depth understanding of the *kakutou fu* strategy, she realized it could be employed by the defensive player and brought it to life on the board.

If this girl named Ai Yashajin becomes a full-blown professional player she may revolutionize early game strategy.

Yes, that match triggered that kind of premonition. Her talent is on a whole other level

“Nh. I see, I see. You have an interesting playing style Now let’s see how you do in a handicap match.”

With that said, Kuruno-*sensei* calls on a higher ranking-player—a member of the Practice League in C2, just one step below the Women’s League: Keika Kiyotaki.

Ai sits down in the lower seat across from Keika. The match conditions were announced as soon as the two of them had all their pieces set up on the board.

“Now then, Keika. Play without a Lance.”

“Yes, sir.”

Keika nods and removes her left Lance, placing it in the piece box.

“Huh?”

Ai watches and says the most unexpected thing I’ve ever heard.

“Shouldn’t I be the one to remove a Lance?”

“!!”

A hair-raising flash of anger passed through Keika’s normally warm and friendly eyes for a second there.

Ai made a preemptive strike in the mental war No, not quite. That was just one of the rude comments that she normally says without thinking

“Haaa

Keika has played against countless bratty kids during her time in the Practice League, so this kind of taunt doesn't even faze her. Her mind is like a fortress. Once she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, she nods.

"..... Okay. I'm ready."

"Ready when you are."

They exchange words and Keika slowly extends her hand to make the first move. That snap echoes throughout the room. It was a calm, well thought out move.

However, Ai's even calmer still. Brazenly so.

"Ohh? So that's how you're going to play?"

Ai takes a look at Keika's opening formation and says, "As if *she's* the one in C2."

Keika didn't react to those words out loud. At the very least, she didn't let her reaction show. Her eyes are glued to the board.

Keika spends several moves strengthening her formation.

Rather than charging in headlong to meet Ai's challenge, she deviates only slightly from the standard style for advantaged players in handicap matches to meticulously build up to a certain point. Now that's cunning.

However, Ai was even more cunning.

"Nooow then"

Ai casually moves a piece into position and Keika's eyes fly open.

"!?? W-What is this?"

Ai didn't move to attack her King, instead choosing to move in on the opposite side. Confused, Keika ignored Ai's offensive and committed more pieces to protect her King but

"Ah!!"

She couldn't help but hold her head in her hands when she realized what Ai was really after.

The sequence that Ai put into play is called Massaging.

It involves taking your opponent's pieces and using them to cut off their attacks.

Rather than pointlessly slam your forces against a wall, the main idea is to whittle down your opponent's ranks until you gain an advantage. Think of it as *massaging* your opponent's formation rather than trying to beat it like a drum. As a bonus, moving your King into their territory for *nyugyoku* becomes an option once all their offensive pieces are off the board.

"Nhh?!"

Kuruno-sensei's eyes go wide.

"Extremely clever How would an elementary school girl who's never set foot in the Practice League learn how to play like that?"

I took her to the Shogi parlors downtown, hehe☆. I can't exactly say that though.

Ai controlled the match the rest of the way.

Each of Keika's few remaining offensive pieces were taken from the board one by one, almost as if her clothes were being ripped off one after another as her formation was thoroughly dismantled. She couldn't even find a chance to surrender. Just like what happened to Ryou at the hands of Big Sis.

"Ah Ugh"

Keika then put Ai in check as if it was her dying wish but, "Humph."

Ai barely used a second of waiting time to take a Pawn from her piece stand and snap it down on the board, finger bending backward, to block the attack.

I knew you were going to do that.

That's what she wants Keika to think, putting the pieces down like that. *Don't embarrass yourself any more than you already have. Give up.*

"Kh! I-I lost"

Overwhelmed by Ai's display, Keika lost the will to keep fighting and throws in the towel.

Rather than doing a review session, she says a quick, "Excuse me," stands up and leaves the room holding a handkerchief over her mouth. Her eyes were red.

She may have been down a lance But losing to an elementary school student testing into the Practice League like that puts her in one heck of a bind.

That, and soon she'll be too old to join the Women's League. Losing a star like this really hurts

"I beat two. Who's next?" says Ai as if it were nothing.

She doesn't look tired at all, even after playing two matches. Playing in this kind of atmosphere, there's no way she isn't tired, but she's not letting it show. She's strong.

"Nh. Well then, for the last match——."

Kuruno-sensei looks at all the Practice League members around the room until his gaze stops in front of one young girl.

🏠 **FLAWLESS COMPOSURE!**

"Miss Ai Hinatsuru."

"Yes!"

"Please play a match against Miss Yashajin. Determine the match with the piece flip."

“..... Yes!”

A piece flip—in other words, Kuruno-*sensei* has seen enough to determine that Ai Yashajin’s abilities are on par with my apprentice.

That, and most likely her talent too.

“..... Ai, against the new girl?!”

“W-Which one’s better?”

The mood in here just flipped like a switch.

Everyone here knows that my apprentice is on a whole other level but also they are fully aware that the new Ai is extremely talented as well.

So, which one is the better player? Everyone wants to see the match so bad that they can’t focus on their own. Everyone’s glancing over at the board between the two Ais, their eyes drawn to it like magnets. The Shogi world is a world of talent and skill. Everything revolves around those who have a lot of both.

There’s a hint of frustration in Kuruno-*sensei*’s voice as he whispers into my ear.

“..... You always seem to bring in the most interesting kids.”

“No, this one wasn’t me, but the chairman”

I start trying to explain the situation, but I don’t want to miss a single move of the match. This conversation can wait.

My apprentice leans forward, focusing all of her body weight onto each piece she puts onto the board while Ai Yashajin boldly puffs out her chest and casually lines up pieces on her side. It’s like their Shogi styles, their very personalities are on display.

“Pardon me.”

The Ai already in the Practice League picks up five Pawns and flips them all at

once. Rather than getting a few words in edgewise, the other Ai grabs the water bottle at her side and takes a quick drink.

The pieces land—three right side up and two upside down. My apprentice is on offense.

“When you’re ready!”

“When you’re ready.”

Ai Hinatsuru practically throws her head down in a bow while Ai Yashajin is showing all the poise of a titleholder rising to a challenge and responds in kind. Then, she quietly turns on the chess clock.

“Suuuu Haaaaaa Okay!”

My apprentice takes a deep breath and makes the first move—of course, the 2 Six Pawn in front of the Rook.

In response, Ai Yashajin advances her 3 Four Pawn to open the Bishop’s Path.

She moved that piece like reaching for a piece of bread at breakfast, nothing to it at all.

The moment Ai Hinatsuru saw that, she immediately opens her own Bishop Path.

I’ll beat you at your own game, no matter what formation you choose!

She’s issuing a challenge.

Ai Yashajin’s face didn’t budge as she moved the Pawn in front of her own Rook without using any waiting time, declaring a war of Rooks. My apprentice plays Static Rook, meaning that should go in her favor. Is Yashajin going to attack head on?

As the two combatants try to feel each other out, Mio makes her way over to me and pulls at my sleeve. She must’ve been left out of this round of matches because there’s an uneven number of participants today. Then she asks.

“..... Is that Side Pawn Capture?”

“I don’t think so It’s looking like——.”

I was tripping over my own words when it happened.

Ai Yashajin’s hand flew across the other side of the board.

She grabs Ai Hinatsuru’s Bishop and puts it on her piece stand and snaps down her own Promoted Bishop in its place.

It’s a Bishop Exchange.

But not just that, it’s——.

“Move-Loss Bishop Exchange?!”

“For real?!!” Mio exclaims in surprise.

The strategy that Ai Yashajin is trying to use is the same one that took down the Panther, one that requires her to *pass on one move* Basically, she’s losing a turn.

This Move-Loss Bishop Exchange is known as a specialist strategy, so it never shows up in a match between amateurs.

Only a handful of pros use it, most notably Kanto’s A Class *Unicorn* Takanobu Shiraishi 9-*dan*, but also Chairman Tsukimitsu and Fumiaki Shamori 8-*dan* in Kansai, and——.

“As one of the few uses of the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, what you think of this match? Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo?”

“..... It’s too soon to tell.”

Just as Kuruno-*sensei* said, I’m one of the pros that uses the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

Now why is it that so few pros use the strategy?

It’s because using it requires your brain to work in a completely different way

compared to other strategies.

“I can’t say yet because there’s a part of the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange strategy that even I don’t completely understand

“Y-You’re the Ryuo, and you don’t know?! In that case, why do you use it?!”
Mio asks in surprise.

I carefully choose my words to help her *understand that this strategy can’t be understood*.

“Do you know which player has the advantage in modern Shogi, offense or defense?”

“The offense, right?”

“Okay then, why do you think they have the advantage?”

“Because they’re on offense?”

“Miss Mizukoshi, that is not an answer.”

“Nmh

“Ummm, I think Because they have one *more* move than the player on defense? Is that right?”

““Exactly!””

Kuruno-*sensei* and I give her full points for that simple answer.

To put it in the most basic terms, they can adjust their formation one more time than their opponent. Anyone could understand that it’d be weird for them not to have an advantage, right?

And it’s true. With the exception of 2008, offensive players have a higher winning percentage than ones on defense in all league matches. Even individual players, excluding a few specialized ones, have a better winning percentage when they make the first move.

The first turn has that much influence on Shogi—however ...

“The Move-Loss Bishop Exchange is a strategy that requires the defensive player, who was already a move behind, to forfeit yet another move. Basically, it means the offensive player is *two moves* ahead.”

“That’s way far behind!”

“Right. Thinking about it logically, passing on a turn when you’re already one move behind isn’t going to fix anything But take a look at that board and tell me what you think.”

I point to where the two Ais are playing.

Ai, playing on defense, has advanced her right Knight and *nearly* pulled into an evenly balanced formation——.

“.....?!”

The Ai on offense had been playing at a brisk pace, but the hand that was flying across the board is now frozen in place.

“Here. This is the moment that makes Move-Loss Bishop Exchange work! Since the formations are even during a normal Bishop Exchange, the common consensus is that the offensive player has the advantage. But a completely different type of Shogi emerges because the defensive player is one move behind!!”

“On defense Her Pawn in front of the Rook is one space behind her opponent’s, right?”

“It is. Now if you look at it from the opposite direction, you could say that the defensive player is *forcing* the offensive player to attack!”

Just one move.

A strange moment comes to pass when the offensive player doesn’t have a good move to play, all because the defensive player passed on their turn. There isn’t a good way to attack here.

Since the offensive player doesn’t have a promising move, there should be one

for the defensive player.

That's what the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange strategy all comes down to.

For that reason, it's possible to say that Move-Loss Bishop Exchange is the pinnacle of Static Rook defensive Shogi.

"Then, once the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange started showing up, people started to understand that there is *acceptable loss* and *unacceptable loss* in Shogi. Not limited to terms of game flow, a whole new *flat* way to look at the game came into existence."

"Acceptable loss."

That discovery is the true merit behind the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

Discovering this one strategy led to a full-fledged rethinking of how *turn loss* actually works. They could even be *acceptable loss* hidden in the old standards. The Shogi world had been stagnant, but people started combing through the classic material for new discoveries all over the place.

Whew, Shogi never gets old, don't you think?

"..... I still find it amazing that Ai can use the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange No amateur should be able to play it, so I doubt she's had an opponent use it on her"

She told me that her father taught her how to play Shogi. That father was the amateur Meijin. It's pretty safe to assume he had near pro-level skill.

"Then again Shogi starts when you have an opponent. With so few people using that strategy and the pros, she couldn't have gotten experience with it as an amateur So where in the world did she pick it up"

There's still a lot I don't know about Ai Yashajin's Shogi history. Sure feels like it.

Speaking of Ai Yashajin, her face hasn't changed since the match began. Using no waiting time at all, she's been advancing at a swift pace.

Meanwhile, my apprentice Ai looks like she's in a serious bind, her face all twisted.

Any Bishop Exchange requires the brain to work in overdrive. Since both players have a Bishop on their piece stand early in the game, they have to keep their formations closely knit together to make sure they don't give their opponent an opening. These matches typically end up with each player mirroring each other's moves, leading to the exact same formations on offense and defense.

It's a nerve-racking battle where both players have a gun loaded with a bullet called Bishop pointed right at each other. All Ai Yashajin has to do is stick to what she knows, it is the early game after all. However, Ai Hinatsuru has to fumble around to find the best move.

That requires a lot of Shogi endurance and waiting time, both of which were starting to take a toll on her.

"Kh Haaa Haa!"

Egg-shaped drops of sweat are rolling down my apprentice's face. Her breathing is ragged too.

Going against the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange isn't easy, so the fact that Ai got this far on her own power is astounding.

However, she has a clear disadvantage in this match.

And she's aware of that. This is the kind of match where you can rely on standard knowledge and what you faced in the past, but she's losing precious time and endurance right now.

Even so, my apprentice found a promising sequence on her own and followed it without making any critical errors as the match progressed. Talk about brainpower. There's a point that professional Shogi players in this position spend lots of time to build up to, and this little girl has gotten to that point out of sheer talent.

The two combatants have arrived at——.

“Double Reclining Silver in a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange Heh.”

“Um Kujyuru-*sensei*? If I remember right, this formation, when both players are mirroring each other, I think Wasn’t it determined that the offensive player’s victory is assured?”

“That’s with a normal Bishop Exchange. There is no consensus on what happens during a Move-Loss.”

And it might be a bit much to say victory is *assured* to the offensive player. *Advantage* would be a better word. Still, it’s a scary situation to be in

Ai moves her Rook to the fourth column. She’s applying direct pressure to the enemy King with a Silver, Knight and now her Rook in an obvious power play with some serious muscle.

However——.

“4 Eight Rook in a Double Reclining Silver situation”

“W-What kind of formation is that?!”

“Recent research says that the defender has the advantage.”

“Whaaat?! Like, how?!”

I don’t blame Mio for her outburst.

Offense and defense are mirroring each other. Since the offensive player already has a turn advantage, common sense says that they would have the upper hand. On top of that, the offensive player has the advantage in a normal Bishop Exchange with thoroughly researched standard sequences at their disposal.

But, as pro Shogi players gain experience and study more and more matches, the defender tends to outlast their opponent. This Move-Loss Bishop Exchange strategy is one heck of a mystery.

“That being said, even pros on the defensive in this situation won’t win all that often.”

“Why is that? The defender has the advantage, right?”

“It’s true that they do on paper. But, that’s only if they perfectly defend against their opponent’s attack. There lies the problem. If they make one mistake during the offensive player’s continuous onslaught, they lose right then and there.”

There is a path, a path to the goal called victory.

But that path is a mere strand of rope at the top of a cliff. Losing your balance for a mere instant will send you tumbling into the valley below.

That's exactly why it's difficult to pull off in a real match.

That's also exactly why so few Shogi players use the Move-Loss Bishop exchange. If you're not confident enough to play the perfect game, it won't work.

Also——no human is perfect.

“Here Here Here Here Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here——.”

Ai Hinatsuru's whole body starts rocking back and forth ever so slightly.

Pouring every second of waiting time she had left into the turn, she read the board as long as possible. Her incredible talent known as *endgame strength* has started spreading its wings.

“Here, here, here,
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——”

She raises her head as if taking a deep breath and keeps going all the way until her eyes meet the ceiling, still thinking as hard as she could.

Looking away from the board allowed her to focus on the mental one inside

her head as she read further and further into the match. She's got this divine aura about her right now, like a priestess receiving a message directly from heaven. Then——.

“——Here!!”

4 Five Pawn!

And the match starts up against that Pawn's advance.

Of course, Ai Yashajin makes the same move. She's back on defense. Leaning in over the board, she's got one hand pressing against one eye while the other eye glares daggers at my apprentice.

“Here we go!” whispers Kuruno-*sensei* and Mio has her eyes glued on the match. This is the point of no return.

As if the long thinking time were the calm before the storm, the two girls' hands start flying across the board at breakneck speed.

“What's going on?!”

Ayano, who had finished her own match, peers over Mio's shoulder to get a better look at this one. Other members of the Practice League and even the Sub League start gathering one after another to see for themselves. Apparently this match is far more engaging than any of their own.

Talent is a bright light.

The brighter it shines, the hotter it burns, the more intense the flames——the more people get drawn in.

Even if they get burned in the process

“Nm!!”

Ai Hinatsuru fires her bullet deep into enemy lines with more vigor than ever before, like gunpowder igniting at her fingertips. A definitive 7 One Bishop!!

“She dropped the Bishop in!”

“Huh?! Why there of all places?!”

Many shocked voices filled the air once they saw Ai’s decision.

Everyone is scrutinizing her move because they know it’s extremely risky to put it there as the offensive player. Not only is its line of fire limited, but that Bishop will almost certainly get taken on the next turn.

It’s just that Ai didn’t have any other options. She’s sacrificing the Bishop so that her Rook can plunge deep into enemy territory, exposing a target to get a better window for an attack. Ai Hinatsuru is absolutely sure she can win the battle once the blades start clashing, so this is just like her. She used up all of her waiting time to plan this out.

However——.

Ai Yashajin didn’t follow that path. Instead, she makes a move that stuns everyone around them.

“She pulled back her Rook?!”

No one predicted that Ai Yashajin would choose to allow Ai Hinatsuru to promote her Bishop uncontested. It’s like lowering the castle drawbridge as if to say, *Come and get me*.

She’s fearless.

That’s an astonishing move.

“Nh?! I never thought I’d see something a professional wouldn’t think of show up in a match like this”

Kuruno-*sensei* complimented her defensive strategy, not because it was a good move, but more because he recognized that Ai Yashajin is far more courageous than the average elementary schooler.

As for how good that move actually is, I’d have to say——.

“Whaaaaaat? Does, does she think she can hold that off?”

“A-A Promoted Bishop is on the board”

Just as Ayano said, Ai Hinatsuru managed to promote her Bishop in enemy territory without losing anything. Not only that, she dropped the Silver right next to it, effectively creating an offensive staging area right in the middle of her opponent’s defenses.

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin——.

“Humph”

Almost laughing through her nose, she casually advances her Gold, *reducing her King’s defense*.

Come on, hit me with your best shot. Taunting by lowering her guard.

“Wow Never, ever have I seen a child able to solely focus on defense to this degree”

Even Kuruno-sensei, who has spent years teaching children how to play the game, can’t hide his surprise at Ai Yashajin’s *bend-but-don’t-break* playing style.

Mio and Ayano have been in shock this whole time.

“Th-this is anyone’s match now, isn’t it?! Who’s going to win?! Have you figured it out?!”

“I have no clue”

This was supposed to be a Practice League entrance test, but members of the Practice League can’t understand the match that’s unfolding in front of their eyes. That’s how intricate and complicated this game has been since the start. It’s proof of the talent pouring out of them.

Ai Hinatsuru attacks.

Ai Yashajin defends.

Two polar opposite playing styles clash, unleashing a ferocious tornado across the board.

However—.

“?! Kh Why?!”

The pressure gets to Ai Hinatsuru, words falling from her pink lips. She leans over the board, squinting as if she’s lost depth perception.

The enemy King was in her grasp, but now it’s agonizingly just out of reach.

I’d bet anything that she’s never felt this level of impatience before.

Up until now, no matter how far she strayed from the standard during the early game, she could win as soon as the battle started. Her unnaturally fast reading ability allowed her to overwhelm her opponent once the pieces started colliding and she’d win in one fell swoop.

Unfortunately, Ai Yashajin wasn’t letting that happen.

The young Yashajin was always able to figure out what my apprentice was trying to do and went in a different direction. The path to victory she saw in that moment disappeared like a mirage the next. All the planning she did became useless, resetting every turn.

Kuruno-*sensei* lets out a long sigh and says, “Her reading isn’t panning out We may have found Miss Hinatsuru’s kryptonite.”

“Yeah. Ai has always played Shogi like a wrestler who throws their opponent out of the ring with sheer arm strength once they get a good grip on them. But that style won’t work on an opponent *that won’t let her grab them.*”

Ai can read fast and deep. But there’s a weakness to such a direct reading style in that it’s *easy for her opponent to see what she’s thinking.*

And when that happens, it’s not difficult to break away from that sequence.

Ai Yashajin forms a line around her King and absorbs Ai Hinatsuru’s assault.

That defensive line is a far cry from a strong formation. Extremely well-balanced, but paper-thin at the same time.

The black haired young girl isn't adorned by thick, heavy armor—but an elegant, beautifully woven dress.

Ten-i Muhou.

It's an expression that means flawless composure.

More specifically, it refers to an angel's celestial robe in that there are no seams. It's perfect just the way it is.

And just like that expression, there are no seams in that defensive line A weakness or a vulnerable point to attack simply don't exist.

It's thin But unbelievably beautiful with unequaled defensive strength. An angel's celestial robe that doesn't belong in this world.

And, the girl wearing that robe—.

Come and get me.

She reaches out and moves a piece like an invitation.

I'll dance for you.

Ai Yashajin smiles, flicking her black hair off her forehead at the same time. Like an angel. Like a demon.

My apprentice makes her decision.

“..... Okay!!”

Psyching herself up, Ai Hinatsuru jumps her Knight forward and sacrifices her Promoted Bishop to launch a head-on assault.

The Rook she had waiting in the fourth column makes its long-awaited advance to the enemy lines and promotes. The big guns are out. Should they misfire, they'll be captured and she'll lose. This is a make-or-break attack in every sense.

The assault hits home, and Ai Yashajin's King has finally been exposed.

But she didn't even blink, moving to attack Ai Hinatsuru's defensive line, replacing the pieces she lost while protecting her King at the same time. My apprentice took it all in stride, placing a Pawn in front of Ai Yashajin's King on her next turn.

Even now, the girl in black didn't break a sweat.

Whoosh As if swinging her leg forward, getting ready to dance, Ai Yashajin slides the Gold out from in beside the King to the side.

Enemy forces are right on the King's doorstep, but she moves the defenses away

".....?!"

Ai Hinatsuru looks down at the board, neck outstretched and a look of bewilderment in her eyes as she blinks over and over, until.

"Yes!!"

She pushes her Pawn directly into the King's defenses with gusto. What a move! The air in here is on fire! Intense!!

"She's got a Check Path?!"

"Now How's she gettin' out of this one?"

A Check Path is exactly that—a path to checkmate.

If Ai Yashajin doesn't block it with her next move, this match will end. It's like Ai Hinatsuru is one space away from bingo.

I can't say for sure if she's on a Check Path or not, but I do know one thing: anything can happen.

Its neck and neck A real skin-of-your-teeth kind of late game.

I almost forget to breathe as I watch Ai Yashajin manage to fend off the Pawn and move that Gold from earlier up another space and attack my apprentice's Promoted Rook. Talk about a competitor! That takes serious guts!

“S-She blocked the attack, using that?!”

“Geeze Just, wow—”

The Practice League members——Ai included——are all dumbfounded. No one saw that move coming.

“?!?!!”

My apprentice’s eyes go wide, her face mere inches above the board. *It couldn’t be!* is written all over her face.

Stunned that her prediction was off, her train of thought came to a screeching halt right in the middle of reading the board.

“Nh! She’s”

“Yeah.”

Kuruno-*sensei* and I exchange a few short words.

We’re professionals, unfazed by the unexpected. Both of us knew immediately the effect that move would have.

However, a single good or bad move doesn’t necessarily determine who wins the match. Sometimes it’s a mistake, rather than the best move at the time, that leads to victory.

“..... Here, here, here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehere Yes!!”

Coming back to herself in the blink of an eye and reading the board until the absolute last moment, Ai Hinatsuru sends her Gold directly into Ai Yashajin’s King.

Check.

My apprentice reads the board in a straight line. Like a beam of light, she finds the fastest, shortest route forward.

On the other hand, Ai Yashajin reads in twists and turns, ducking out of that

route.

Picture a massive black hole using its immense gravity to bend light to its will. That's Ai Yashajin, the girl dressed in black moving her King to narrowly avoid the laser-like attacks bearing down on it every time.

Ai Hinatsuru's Gold, Silver, Knight, Promoted Knight and Promoted Rook all moved in to attack the enemy King. Heck, it would blow the robe off entirely if there were no seams to tear. A concentrated blast of fire meant to drown out the darkness once and for all!!

"That's gotta be checkmate? That's checkmate, right?!"

"No! It'll come up a hair short?"

"Whew This is too much!!"

Practice League members are up on their knees to get a better view of the battle between the two girls. Kuruno-*sensei* is usually very strict about that, but he says nothing. The board is a stage. Everyone is mesmerized by their dance and can't look away.

Bullets falling like rain, Ai Yashajin continues her graceful dance, dodging every volley.

The Knight's skirt gets torn away, the Silver sleeves are blown off, the Gold hairpin is flung from sight. The pieces descend on her from all directions like a storm of flower petals, dying beautiful deaths on the board one after another.

It's the most beautiful scene in the world, and only Shogi players can witness it.

Her defensive *dress* was in shambles, but the King inside, her *body* didn't have a scratch on it.

Move eighty-nine. Ai Yashajin's King didn't have a single piece left around it.

—Completely defenseless.

Even so, Ai continued to dance unscathed. That ironclad spirit of hers hasn't broken. Heck, it hasn't even shaken.

The naked King continues the elegant waltz.

Boldly.

Flawlessly.

Then——.

“..... Aahh”

For a moment, a look of resignation passes over my apprentice's face.

Ai Yashajin's King escapes to the wide open right side of the board like a dancer leaving the stage at the end of a musical number. Ai Hinatsuru has read the board enough to know that victory has slipped through her fingers. That she has lost.

The next twenty or so moves were nothing more than her setting the stage and coming to grips with her fate.

The battle ended.

▲ LIGHT THAT WENT UNSEEN

“..... I lost.”

Placing her hands on the board, my apprentice signaled that she is throwing in the towel.

Buckets of sweat start rolling down Ai Yashajin's white cheeks as soon as she did, long black hair suddenly plastered to her skin.

Since the winner's mind has to be going full throttle until the final moment,

it's impossible to relax right away. She may have maintained an elegant air, but Ai Yashajin had just barely come out on top.

On the other hand, Ai Hinatsuru looks more at peace.

Since the loser has time—time to mentally prepare and accept the loss from the moment their spirit breaks, they seem a lot more collected when the match ends.

It also helps that her opponent used an early game strategy she'd never seen before and perfectly blocked her offensive. Losing this way doesn't hurt too bad because you have the best excuse, "My opponent was really good." It's much, much worse when you let a chance to win slip away and end up losing knowing you could have won. Those matches hurt, so much so I don't want to talk about it.

My apprentice thinks that she never had a chance.

Then again, Ai Yashajin probably thinks the exact same thing. That she played the perfect game.

"Nh. That was a great match, you two."

Practice League instructor Kuruno-*sensei* addresses the two Ais as the girls sat there in silence.

"Miss Yashajin, you showed excellent technique. Miss Hinatsuru, your pursuit was outstanding. Especially towards the endgame. Though, I must say, it's unlike you to miss a checkmate."

"Huh?" the girls' voices echo.

The two girls look up at him in shock. Kuruno-*sensei* moves the pieces back a few turns and starts to explain.

"This move would have ended the match."

In that moment, my apprentice's expression changed in the blink of an eye.

“Ah!”

A simple seven-move checkmate.

Kuruno-*sensei* had returned the board to the point where Ai Yashajin advanced her Gold.

Not only was it questionable, it was the worst possible move she could make. All Ai Hinatsuru had to do was take it, and checkmate.

“Ah Ahhh!”

If this had been a Shogi puzzle, I bet Ai would've solved it in a second. Now, holding her head in her hands with eyes open wide in disbelief at having such a simple, straightforward Check Path pointed out to her, my apprentice shakes her head no over and over again.



She wipes away tears between sobs, but the dam has already broken.

“..... It was right there Right there!”

Tears dripping onto the board, my apprentice keeps lining up the pieces and moving them into checkmate only to reset and do it all over again.

Ai Yashajin didn't say anything, just watched the pieces move with her head down. There's anger in her eyes, anger at herself. She didn't see that Check Path either.

It was a simple one, but neither of them spotted it during the match.

Opponents synchronizing during a match is pretty common. It was Ai Yashajin's careless oversight that caused Ai Hinatsuru's mistake. There's no difference in their skill level at all. Ai Yashajin won the match, but Ai Hinatsuru prevailed in the psychological battle on the board.

However, that's not much consolation for the loser.

Since there was a chance to win, the *my opponent was better than me* excuse goes right out the window.

She lost because of her own weakness.

Weak enough to miss a seven-move checkmate.

It's exactly why she's sobbing and moaning in pain, that fact was made clear as day. Knowing that she wasn't good enough to see a seven-move checkmate is what's triggering these tears.

She wipes them away with the back of one hand, fingernails digging into her knee with the other.

“I hate this! This hurts!”

There's a great deal of remorse in her voice.

“I-I I thought I couldn’t get there during the match Gave up halfway through Fell so far behind at the start that at some point I started thinking I can’t win anyway Master said she’s better, so there’s no way, that same voice over and over, wearing me down, breaking my spirit before I knew what happened

Plop, plop. Like her tears hitting the board.

Ai squeezes the words out of her throat, her voice getting more distant with each syllable.

“I I lost!”

But then, each word started coming out rougher than the last.

“If only I’d practiced more If only I’d played against stronger opponents more! If only I’d done even more Shogi puzzles! If only I’d focused on Shogi so much that I didn’t have time to think about anything else! If only I’d done more I could’ve done so much more!! I came all the way to Osaka so that I could practice Shogi more too!!”

There’s no anger or resentment for an opponent after a loss.

All of it is directed inward, directly at yourself.

All of that anger is at how weak you are.

That’s why my apprentice is yelling from the bottom of her heart like this, slapping her knees like so many before her at this very place.

“I I want to be better, stronger!!”

All of the professionals, Practice League members, and Sub League members in the room including myself, do nothing to comfort her.

All of us know that pain.

Every single person that has entered the world of professional Shogi overcomes it on their own. If you can't bear it, you can't last in this world.

Simply put, playing professional Shogi means you will continue to lose.

No pro is invincible. All of us are scarred.

All of us will lose, it's not a matter of if but when. Actually the better the player, the more they've lost.

Players good enough to get to the top play more matches, and thus lose more matches. The number in the loss column is a badge of honor.

Even though we all understand this, losing is so painful that it physically hurts.

It doesn't go away with age or once you make it into the big matches, that makes it worse. Losing makes a grown man want to cry. Nothing is more appealing than running home, bawling at the top of your lungs and jumping headfirst into bed to have a good cry. Some people actually do. The urge to grab a knife and cut off the hand that made such a stupid mistake is very real.

It's because Shogi is all we know. If Shogi rejects us, there's nothing left.

“.....”

My apprentice is learning what that pain is, what it means for the first time as I silently watch from a distance.

Expressing happiness, sadness or anger while seated in front of the Shogi board, basically letting emotions take over, is considered rude. As Ai's master, it's normally my responsibility to take her away from the board and scold her for this.

But right now, I think it's okay for her to cry.

It's okay for the pain to seep into her very being. She can cry her heart out, bite the pieces and let those tears of sadness drop onto the board.

People who don't cry when they lose will never get stronger.

I wanted Ai to experience this feeling. Teach it to her.

I can teach her techniques. I can teach her how to prepare mentally as well.

But there's no way for Big Sis or I to get her to feel something at the very bottom of her soul. The only way to do that is for Ai to meet someone that she absolutely does not want to lose against under any circumstances, and compete against them.

An opponent you don't want to lose against—only a rival can fill that role.

"..... Looks like I win," says Ai Yashajin, her gaze on the board where her own King was in checkmate. "You may have had a chance to win, but you let it slip away. In other words, you weren't good enough to take it," says Ai, thrusting the words out there.

Her lips pale, she's struggling to control her shaky voice.

"You aren't on my level. None of the Practice League Members in this room are. It doesn't matter that you got in first, I don't look up to anyone weaker than myself."

"..... Humph"

Having seen her talent with their own eyes, no one tries to argue. They're all still in shock at her overwhelming might.

However, Ai wasn't done yet.

"But—I suppose thinking of you as an opponent would be all right."

Those words were tiny, quiet Barely above a whisper. Her pale face had taken on a redder hue than usual.

The response was explosive.

"Ai!"

My apprentice looks up from the board, reaches out with her hand still glistening with tears, and grabs hold of her opponent's hand and yells, "A review session! Let's review?! Please?!"

"..... Fine."

Ai Yashajin knocks Ai Hinatsuru's hand away before grumpily resituating herself. Their conversation started off on an uncomfortable note, but quickly became an invigorated discussion.

"Where 'da heck did she learn Move-Loss?!"

"That move really turned out to be the best?! What about movin' like this?!"

The other Practice League members join in, smiles spreading around the room in no time.

No one's hesitating to talk to Ai Yashajin anymore, and she looks comfortable responding to them. Shogi has that power. A mysterious power that brings people together.

Relieved, I was about to leave the room when——.

"Master!!"

My apprentice stops in the middle of her review session to turn and call out to me.

"Umm, ehh Uhh"

My clumsy apprentice stumbles over words, trying to find the best ones—— but ends up with the most straightforward ones possible.

"Once I come home Please, teach me to play Shogi again!!"

Hearing her words from behind my back, I——.

"..... I'll be in front of the shops at the usual time."

I stop walking, but stay facing forward and respond with only my voice I can't let her see tears running down her Master's face.

“The refrigerator is empty. We’ll stop by the supermarket on the way home.”

“..... Yes!! Master!!”

Shogi is always the best way to make amends.

Once I leave the room, I quickly spot Akira leaning against the wall with her arms folded across her chest. Her nerves couldn’t take it, so she left the room well before I did. Sunglasses are back on. Mafia, 100 percent. A fish out of water at the Shogi Association.

“Sorry, Akira. They’re really getting into the review session, so it’ll be a while longer.”

“Humph I can kill time, no problem. I’ve got this, you see!”

Akira then boldly takes a piece of green paper out of her suit pocket, holding it up between her fingers with a proud smirk on her face.

“?!! T-That’s!!”

A Shogi Association Match Card. 13-*kyu*

“Heh heh heh I was feeling lightheaded and went downstairs to buy a drink when a young person behind the front counter addressed me. They apparently recognized my hidden talent”

That’s pandering to customers, happens all the time.

It’s not every day that women visit the association, so one of the staff members or a part-time Sub League member worked up the courage to say hello.

But Akira doesn’t seem to understand that, trying to sound informed by spouting a Shogi term she doesn’t understand like, “My Static Rook style came alive, a direct approach with *koshikae gin*.” She just keeps going, and I doubt

she knows much at all about the Reclining Silver Strategy.

“Oh yes, that’s right. The strategy my lady just employed The Mid-Boss Shop Change, was it?”

“The Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.”

“Yes, that’s what I said!”

Akira sounded more like a girl her age for a moment before forcing herself back into her usual tone.

“That is your specialty, correct? I’ve heard that almost no one else uses it.”

“That’s true.”

“Please consider why my lady employed that strategy against your apprentice, *Sensei*. Think on it.”

“.....The meaning behind, the Move-Loss”

That did catch my attention.

And my suspicions were pretty much confirmed during that match.

Move-Loss strategies aren’t something that amateurs can just read about and use in a match. Ai Yashajin’s level is far too high for that.

She plays with the pro’s touch.

No amount of talent would allow her to do that.

Using the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange requires a special feel for the game that can only be refined through practice.

Talent only takes shape with a lot of practice.

It’s almost like she’s studied every match when that strategy was used, playing through the match records over and over until her fingernails cracked, blood tracing the pieces over the board

Ai Yashajin had to have endured the same level of training. I can tell. As

someone who's walked down the same path, I see the signs.

What is it that Ai wants from Shogi?

As the only one who truly understands her playing style, I'm the only one who can truly answer that question.

That's what Akira is asking, that much I know. Which is exactly why I answered, "..... Yes. I'm putting a lot of thought into it."

"Please do."

Akira nods.

"One more thing. My lady has only worn black garments since the day her parents passed."

".....!"

"However, I would like nothing more than to see my lady adorned in white. While she is the very definition of beauty in black I believe that she would be truly stunning in white."

Her voice sounded almost dreamlike, trying to stifle sadness at the same time.

So, I declare with confidence, "I think so too."

"Yes!"

She wraps her arm around my shoulders and spoke with glee. She must've liked it.

"By the way, *Sensei*. Are you going home?"

"Oh, I'm not. I need to wait for my apprentice to finish up"

"Perfect! To the classroom. I'll show you how much I've improved!"

"Sure, sure."

She then played against a 12-*kyu* kindergartner and forfeited because she violated the rules, moving her Silver straight back. She didn't even hesitate.

She still has a long, long way to go.

RECORD 5

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-dan

ETERNAL MEIJIN *CONCERNING ETERNAL TITLES

- **PLAYER NUMBER:** 151
- **BIRTHDATE:** April 4th 1967
- **HOMETOWN:** Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture
- **MASTER:** (the late) Juzo Sakai 9-dan
- **RYUO MATCH:** 1st class (1st class ranking—22 seasons)
- **PLACEMENT MATCH:** A group (A ranking—32 seasons)
- **TITLE HISTORY:**

TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	57
TITLE OWNERSHIP:	27 seasons

TITLE MATCH VICTORIES

COMBINED:	22
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NUMBER ONE

“Master.”

Once we got home and I had my apprentice’s cooking for the first time in a while, Ai was setting out teacups on the low table in the *tatami* room and saying “Master” over and over.

“Master. Master, Master. Maaaster.”

“Yeah? Something wrong?”

“Just saying hello! E-heh≡”

A-dor-a-ble.

“Ughh whoaaaaaaa!”

I couldn’t stop my spirit’s cry of joy from leaking out. She’s just so cute. Way too cute. I’d love to pat her head and give her a piece of candy, do anything for her. Give her a big hug and Wait, wait, wait! I gotta be more careful?! That’s the first step down the Loli path?!

Calm down. Cool your head. This is just the affection a Master feels for their apprentice, that’s all it is

“Um Master? Were you lonely when I was gone?”

“Very. You have no idea.”

“E-heh≡ E-heh≡”

My apprentice sits down on her ankles next to the table, hiding her face like she’s embarrassed. So cute!

I can’t imagine what it would be like not having her here anymore.

It wasn’t all that long ago that I was living on my own, fighting all by myself But that feeling of emptiness when my apprentice was gone, I’ve never felt

anything like it before.

But then again.

Even though Ai is back here, that same kind of emptiness is still clamping down on me.

“..... Ai. Can we talk?”

“What is it, Master?”

“Something very important.”

I hurt her by hiding things.

That’s why I want to say everything up front. I won’t be making that mistake again.

“Well, do you want a younger sister?”

“.....?”

Her eyes went blank.

“In other words, basically it’s about the girl you played against this afternoon, Ai Yashajin——.”

“!!”

Flinch! Her whole body just snapped away from me. She’s on high alert

“..... If I took her as an apprentice, would you object?”

I said it.

I really didn’t know what I wanted to do about Ai Yashajin until just now, when the words came out of my mouth.

But, I just couldn’t let her go off on her own after all. I think that’s the worst thing I could do. But, it’s not because of what Akira said.

Her playing style intrigues me. I can’t help it.

“..... But she’s already Mr. Chairman’s apprentice, right?”

“Yes, well That’s true but”

I scratch my head but say as clearly and firmly as possible.

“I’ll take her. By force if I have to.”

“.....”

Ai stays seated, but deftly turns away. Her back to me, she says, “..... Who is number one?”

“Huh?”

No idea what she meant, I ask for clarification and she repeats herself.

“Master, who is number one to you?”

Say what?! What kind of question is that?

Ah, is she talking about who my first apprentice is?

“That’s you, Ai.”

“..... Really?”

“Of course. Who else would it be?”

“That Ai, or Auntie Ginko-*sensei*. Or Keika”

Big Sis? Keika? They’re my sibling apprentices, not apprentices.

And Ai Yashajin would be the second in my apprentice lineage, so of course she would be number two. As long as Ai Hinatsuru doesn’t leave, it’ll always be that way.

“What’re you so worried about? No matter how many apprentices I take Hypothetically, okay? Only hypothetical.”

Half of a very angry face appeared over my apprentice’s shoulder and I had to scramble to clarify myself.

“I don’t plan on taking any more but Hypothetically speaking, no matter how many apprentices I take—number one will always be you, Ai.”

“.....”

Ai, her back still to me, doesn't say anything.

But, her toes are wiggling back and forth and the curls in her hair are swishing side to side like a dog's tail. Is she happy? She is, right?

“So Ai? About taking another apprentice——.”

“..... How many matches did you play with her?”

“Come again?”

“How many games of Shogi did you play?”

“H-How many? Not very many at all. I basically just had her play against people in the city If I had to guess, I'd say we played maybe twenty games tops——.”

“No maybes!!”

“Whoa?! Ahh, ok, weeell There was the first game, and then at the classroom, one, two, three, four E-Eighteen all together? At least, I think so”

“Okay, play nineteen times with me right now.”

“Huuuh?! R-Right now?! I have a league match tomorrow——.”

“Okay, then once that match is over! Anyway, Master has to play the most matches with me!!”

“O-Okay, okay! I will! We'll play nineteen games as soon as I get home tomorrow!!”

“That's a promise?! I won't forgive you if you break this one?!”

Ai spins back around and starts lining up pieces on my Shogi board as if reserving it for our promised matches.

Seeing my apprentice's renewed craving to play Shogi tells for sure that what I

did to teach her was the right choice.

Losing to Ai Yashajin must have lit her competitive fire.

So, she wants an edge over her, even if it's just one more match against me.

No doubt! This is directly because of my teachings! Master knows best!

"..... Ai, you've grown!"

"Huh? It's only been a week since I ran away?"

What happens when you don't see an elementary school girl for three days? They grow like weeds. Very, very quickly.

I swear! Grade schoolers are the best!! That didn't come out right, a bit to Loli-ish. I gotta be more careful

But anyway, kids grow up just fine on their own. Especially the strong ones.

So, Ai Yashajin will be just fine, even if I'm not with her.

Once she becomes an apprentice to one of the best players around, just as she wanted, she'll probably join the Women's League in no time. As the chairman's apprentice, as the Shogi world's princess.

But.

I just can't accept that ending as it is.

That's why I'm going to break into the castle and rescue the princess. Take her out from right under the king's nose. I've made up my mind. I'm going to do something that Sir Ayumu would call *evil*, an insolent, diabolical act.

The Ryuo's work is never done.

▲ RYUO AND MEIJIN

Next day. I went to the Kansai Shogi Association to play a league match

against Chairman Tsukimitsu.

Final round of the Throne League, 5th match.

It's already been determined that I no longer qualify for this league and will soon drop out of it. As for the chairman, he has the necessary record to stay in the Throne League, but not enough to proceed to the playoffs that will determine who challenges the titleholder. This match is meaningless for the both of us.

And to said meaningless match, I——

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*?! T-Those clothes!?”

A Sub League member working as the recordkeeper almost stood up in surprise the moment I step into the *Onjyoudan no Ma*, the Throne Room.

I tip my head in a casual greeting, get situated in the lower seat and take my fan and watch out of my second bag.

I came to today's match——in a formal kimono.

“Wearing a kimono to a match like this means?”

“Is it because he's playing against the chairman?”

“..... That's one heck of an aura! The Ryuo has arrived!”

Other players with matches in the Throne Room today whisper among themselves behind me. All of them understood the meaning behind wearing traditional clothes to a match other than when a title is on the line.

The true meaning behind this attire——an absolute refusal to lose. On my honor as *Ryuo*.

It wasn't long before the sliding door opened to reveal my opponent, a figure standing tall and sharp as a katana.

“Oh

Miss Oga was right next to him like a shadow, but I doubt she needed to say anything for the chairman to realize what I’m wearing just by the sound of the fabric.

There was a time when he was in title matches almost every day, so I’m sure he’s very familiar with it.

“Chairman.”

I address my opponent from the lower seat.

“What is it?”

“I have a request.”

Miss Oga snaps at me.

“Ryuo! Right before a match is hardly the time or the place to——.”

“Let’s hear what he has to say,” the chairman cuts her off and gestures toward me.

I take a moment to swallow the built-up spit in my mouth and say.

“If If I win this match, I would like your permission to take Ai Yashajin as my apprentice.”

“She has already been registered as my apprentice, yes?”

“.....”

I had an answer ready for that. A well thought out, logical answer.

But for whatever reason I couldn't say it and instead reply.

“I want her. No matter what it takes.”

The chairman gave a simple, quiet nod in response.

“All right then.”

Then, he said this.

“Shogi shall decide.”

“..... Yes!”

The chairman silently made his way to the upper seat as Miss Oga lined up his pieces on the board, per her role as his assistant.

However, the chairman usually moves the pieces himself during the match unless something goes very wrong. Just to make sure, he always announces his move before physically moving the piece. That way, what he says takes priority over the move itself in case he grabs the wrong one by mistake.

Blind people can still play Shogi, and become extremely good. Blind players have made their mark in every era of Shogi history.

One example would be the man who created the *Ishida-style* Ranging Rook strategy, Kengyou Ishida.

Another one would be Kengyou Ishimoto, the man who beat *Edo's Last Master*, Souho Amano, without a handicap.

And in the modern era—the Eternal Meijin, Seiichi Tsukimitsu.



That A class professional spoke as soon as his assistant and Women's League 1-*dan* professional Sasari Oga puts the last piece in place on the board.

"Sasari."

"Sir."

"Would you please hang *it* on the wall?"

With those words.

""!!""

Not only was Miss Oga surprised, the jaws of everyone in the room hit the floor.

Here in the Throne Room, the holiest location in the Kansai Shogi Association, hang three scrolls.

"Sky follows Taoism."

"Humans follow land."

"Land follows sky."

They were written by the 14th, 15th and 16th Meijins respectively.

However the set isn't complete.

There is a fourth scroll in the series. It has already been written and mounted on special paper reserved for important scrolls.

However it's never hung up on the wall for regular matches.

That's because the writer is still an active player and no one has taken his title of the 17th Eternal Meijin.

"Taoism follows nature." 17th Meijin Seiichi Tsukimitsu

Sasari Oga, Women's League 1-*dan*, retrieves the scroll and hangs it on the wall as if handling a holy artifact. Every player in the room naturally rose to



attention as if paying their respects, almost like a reflex.

How could they not, the Meijin is the same as a god to the Shogi world.

And that god sits down in front of me with that scroll at his back. Like a lake nestled at the very top of the mountain, its surface completely still. Tranquil.

As for me, sitting on the opposite side of the board, it was more like an overwhelming avalanche of competitive prowess. Without my kimono holding me down, I probably would've been blown out of my seat before I knew what happened.

Just as I've come to fight in a full kimono, the chairman is putting his pride as the Meijin on the line for this battle

"Ryuo and Meijin", the Sub League member beside the board whispers with a mixture of awe and envy.

Immediately, he comes back to himself and speaks with more presence.

“The The appointed time for the match has arrived. Tsukimitsu-*sensei* has the first move. Please begin!”

“When you’re ready.”

Our breathing aligned, we exchange greetings and the chairman makes his first move without the slightest hesitation, announcing it at the same time.

“7 Six Pawn.”

I take a breath and do the same, opening the Bishop’s Path. As the defensive player, I have been entrusted with the right to choose my own strategy. And I followed the one that I settled on even before the match began.

That strategy being—Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

My admiration for the man sitting in front of me was the driving force to learn this strategy in the first place.

I’m not the only one who admires the chairman. There’s no way anyone raised in Kansai No, anyone who has learned how to play Shogi wouldn’t admire Seiichi Tsukimitsu.

So then why is it that more people don’t play the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange?

Because it’s too specialized. That’s why no matter how many people admire the chairman, most people don’t have enough patience to perfect the craft into a viable option in battle.

However, I kept using it no matter how many times Big Sis wiped the board with me. One loss led to another, and another, and another but I never thought of abandoning it.

My Master plays with incredible power.

The chairman's style is faster than the speed of light.

I wanted my play style to include both of theirs.

Because I wanted to be—the best.

“Haa Here we go!!”

I straighten my kimono's collar and psych myself up before reaching deep into enemy territory to take the Bishop. The Chairman then took my newly Promoted Bishop, finishing the Bishop exchange.

Now, the hallowed Move-Loss Bishop Exchange contract is complete.

In this battle between two specialists, both offense and defense now have valuable weapons at their fingertips.

It wasn't long before we arrived at the same point that the two Ais did. Move-Loss Bishop Exchange Double Reclining Silver.

Now the real battle begins.

The chairman thought for exactly five minutes and says.

“4 Five Pawn.”

He sticks out a Pawn, sacrificing it to start the battle in earnest.

Fighting back the terrifying thought of letting the Eternal Meijin go on the offensive, I move to strengthen my defense. His Rook moves in, I block it with a Pawn. He deploys his Bishop in my territory, but I hold fast. I'll need solid armor to outlast an opponent who wins with speed.

But, I have a knife hidden beneath the armor.

Move 52—5 Five Silver!!

“.....!”

The chairman's expression twitches ever so slightly the instant I announce my move.

Seconds later, he made a sound like he was appraising a piece of priceless artwork.

“..... Ohh.”

This was the ace in the hole that I prepared just for today.

The Bishop he deployed on my side of the board is a vital piece of his final push that goes directly through 5 Five. Therefore, he can't take my Silver. What originally looked to be a defensive move was actually an attack in disguise.

That's when chaos broke out.

He blocked my attack before moving in again, which I blocked and followed with my own counterattack. Back and forth again and again throughout the mid game.

Big pieces colliding, the battle spreading like sparks from a flame, I endure long enough to get the opening I want and move to attack the chairman's King through the back door.

But I paid a hefty price.

Three big pieces are under his control, as is more than half the board with the overwhelming power he wields. I can't read the formation at all. There's a chance I've already lost.

After all, I'm going against the Eternal Meijin. I could've already been struck down without realizing it That's a very real possibility. He's done that to so many opponents before me.

Even so, I don't break down, don't give up and keep stubbornly trudging forward like the muddy outlaw I am.

I can see my apprentice's hot tears in my heart.

But there's something else too, another girl's courage to keep fighting even when her King's protection was paper thin.

Those tears and that courage have to take over this Shogi match. Ultimately, I'm——.

“I *am* the Master!”

I roll up my sleeves and take a piece off my piece stand, slapping it onto the board directly in the enemy King's path, pressing down onto the board until my knuckles go white.

Even with a Promoted Rook and Promoted Bishop in my own territory, on the 126th move—I put him in check by deploying a 7 Six Gold!

“..... It's been a very long time. A long time since I've experienced such a contested late game,” said the chairman, his eyes slightly wider than usual. He hadn't said anything beyond announcing his moves during the match up to this point.

He hadn't even flinched. But now, even maintaining his picture-perfect posture, he's swaying back and forth to establish a reading rhythm.

He uses a great deal of waiting time as if trying to figure out what I'm after.

“This feeling, This full-body rush in my veins during the late stages of a match. It's nostalgic, There was a word for this, for such an occasion, Yes——.”

He continues, whispering to himself when suddenly eyes that lost light long ago slowly opened and he put a word to that feeling.

“Intense.”

Light raced across the board a heartbeat later.

At move 127.

The chairman's next move—deploying a Bishop at 3 one, *check*.

“Now—!!”

It felt like he'd reached into my chest and ripped out by heart with his bare hands, like all the blood in my body stopped flowing at the same time.

—No way, I'm in checkmate?!

It's said that players who went against the chairman in his glory days would throw in the towel when in check, right then and there, even if they could see a way for their King to escape.

They trusted the chairman's ability to read the board more than their own

“..... No way But, then again?”

I don't see a checkmate. My King should still be alive. Should be.

Then again, the person sitting in front of me His records, his titles, his appearance His overwhelming presence is making my fingers go numb.

Shivering and frozen solid, I hear the recorder say my name.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Your waiting time has expired. Please continue according to one-minute Shogi rules.”

“..... Understood!”

There's no time to wonder anymore.

With my waiting time gone, I keep thinking until the absolute last moment and still didn't see a way for him to put my King in checkmate.

So, I take the Bishop he deployed with the King itself. 3 One King!

“6 Four Promoted Bishop.”

In check for the second time. The chairman immediately moves his Promoted Bishop to attack my King. I can't deploy anything to protect it. My only choice is

to move it back where it was.

Then, his Promoted Rook slices in, tearing away my defensive Gold. Now I'm in check for the third time. If I take it, it's all over. I waste no time escaping forward.

My destination: enemy territory. *Nyuugyoku*. Get my King across the board.

But the checks keep coming.

I avoid the Knight's long reach in my way by shifting to the side as soon as it was deployed. His Promoted Rook is in hot pursuit, but I dodge its attack and take a Lance at the same time.

The chairman moves the Promoted Rook all the way across the board right away.

Am I out of options after all? Have I already lost? I shake off my doubts and continue to dodge newly deployed pieces one after another until my King finally crosses into enemy territory.

Then——.

“..... Yes!”

——*Nyuugyoku* complete.

Turn 146, at long last, my King arrived in the ninth row, the deepest part of my opponent's side of the board.

Normally, making it this far means my King is safe.

Since most pieces in Shogi can't move backward, it's really hard to put a King in check once it gets through the front lines.

Unfortunately.

“2 Eight Silver.”

Almost as if he saw this coming, the chairman deploys a Silver onto the board using zero waiting time and puts me in check with the same move. That's

eleven turns in a row!

“?!”

I thought my heart was going to stop the moment that Silver came down.

At first glance, it looked like it was on its own without any support. However, the Promoted Rook was protecting it from across the board.

I can't take it!

“Yes!!”

A celebratory whisper leaks from Miss Oga's mouth. That's the kind of thing she ordinarily never allows herself to do, but she probably got caught up in the heat of battle and just couldn't help it.

That's the kind of impact the chairman's Silver had.

Getting my King this deep into enemy territory meant that its movement options were now extremely limited. There's almost nowhere to run. And this Silver has now pinned my King directly between a rock and hard place, trapped in the corner.

The board looks like a *nyuugyoku*-style Shogi puzzle, where this poetic Silver was destined to put my King in checkmate from the start—.

Take it in—my King is dead. Run—and my King is dead.

“..... In that case!”

I just have to charge right into it!!

I slide my King into the second column, directly behind the Silver. Thinking back to how an elephant moves, the only safe place now is in the Silver's blind spot. I can't even breathe, the pressure is so intense.

“3 Nine Gold.”

The chairman deploys a Gold in an effort to pin my King into the corner of the board.

My King, still in the Silver's blind spot, needs to go in the opposite direction. So, I bring it around the Silver to the other opening. 1 Eight King.

That Silver was put in place to hold my King down, but I found a way to swing by it and a way out of the danger zone!

That's right.

My King is coming home—racing *back to my territory* at full speed.

"H How could such a defensive maneuver be viable ?!"

Disbelief erupts from Miss Oga's lips before she clamps them shut with both hands in a flash.

It's practically unheard of for a King to achieve *nyuugyoku* only to retreat all the way back again. As a former Women's League player, Miss Oga's mind must be spinning, not sure what to think. As in, *that could never work*.

However, this is all I've got. Muddy, sure, but my King should come out alive!

I can see a path to victory, but my heart is beating like mad. Each heartbeat makes my hands shake and it takes everything I've got to keep them steady. Did I win? I've won!

Even so, the chairman turns up the pressure on my King, voice brimming with vigor.

"1 Nine Silver."

1 Seven King!

"1 Eight Silver."

1 Six King!

"1 Seven Pawn."

1 Five King!!

Then, on move 156—once my King retreated back to the fifth row, the chairman says, “It seems as though I’m out of options.”

“Th— ou!”

My throat is spazzing so much that the words *thank you* won’t come out. I lower my head in a deep bow out of reflex.

Only then did I realize I’m sweating up a storm. My hair is plastered to my forehead. My kimono is twice as heavy after absorbing so much sweat I can’t even lift my head back up.

This is the first time I’ve survived being in check for fifteen consecutive turns. Against the Eternal Meijin, no less

“..... Haaa Haaa”

For few moments, the only sound inside the arena was my ragged breaths. Every other match taking place in here was already over and I have no idea. I reach out to grab a cup of water to help calm my breathing But my hands were shaking so much that I gave up on taking a drink and put it back down.

At long last, the chairman says with the same calm tranquility as when he announced his surrender.

“Back when I put you in check by deploying a Bishop at 3 One——.”

“Yes?”

“What would’ve happened if I had defended with the 5 Eight Gold?”

“..... Agh?!”

My head springs up on its own. I worked it out on the Shogi board in my head and immediately thought less of my victory.

——Evading my Check Path and finding his own Check Path!

It’s the ultimate counterpunch, opening *a Check Path that would allow him to*

escape the one I had on him. That one move would've changed everything. It was just that *good*.

One single move would've flipped a match that I thought I had won into an agonizing defeat.

"Aghh"

I look to the heavens, groaning.

I was so focused on my King that I didn't realize the chairman had moved his pieces into position to defend. I didn't read it at all.

If he'd gone with 5 Eight Gold, the victorious shoe would be on the other foot.

Basically, I was saved because he made a mistake.

I'd be willing to bet that the chairman realized it as soon as he started the rush of checks. He had the whole situation figured out more accurately and long before I did.

I can't help but think on it again.

— If he was in his prime

—No, above all, if he could see

If that were the case, I would've been sliced down in the blink of an eye. For sure.

While it's true we can see the board in our heads, it's not like we can keep track of the whole thing at the same time. Focusing on one area makes the big picture go dark.

That's why players will work out situations in their head and then check to see what's on the board, going back and forth to make sure we're not overlooking something vitally important.

But the chairman can only see what's in his head.

There's no way to know just how debilitating that handicap is

So, there I am, mouth half open and staring at the ceiling, when the chairman grins for some reason and says something really strange.

“Now then, I finally paid you back for that favor years ago, yes?”

“Huh?”

This was our first match. I never played against him before turning pro either.

What favor? Before I could ask, the chairman starts packing up.

“The defeated shall bow out. Please discuss the rest amongst yourselves.”

He stands up without making a sound, leaving behind even more mysterious words before leaving the arena. Miss Oga, the rolled-up scroll back in its box and in her grasp, gave me a begrudging glance before shifting her gaze to the corner of the room.

I follow it with my eyes.

There’s a young girl dressed in black standing there. Wait, whaaat?

“..... Ai?”

“About time you noticed me, *Kuzu*.”

The girl who could become my apprentice stares me down with her usual intimidating glare.

▲ SHOGI FAMILY

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

“S-Since when?”

“I came right after school let out, so since about 5.”

So then, that would be about five hours? That’s close enough to whole time. How could I have not noticed? How could I have been that focused on the

board?

“Well, um I was completely zoned in! It was a very important match!”

“I should say so. A person was on the line.”

“Agh!”

Ai glares at me through the top of her eyes and says with a hint of spite in her voice.

“Why would you do something like this? The two of you just decide to choose who becomes my Master with a game of Shogi without getting my permission? What kind of *shinken* is that? No Shogi parlor in New World would even think of going that far.”

..... She’s absolutely right.

But, this was the only way I could think of. Shogi is all I have, and it’s always been how I’ve settled things.

Everything I’ve ever wanted, I could only get by winning a Shogi match. That’s what it means to live in the Shogi world.

“E-Enough about that, take a look at this!!”

I turn over my second bag and take a piece of folded paper out from inside.

It’s a copy of a Shogi record that I dug up in the association archives. I found it and made a copy before coming to today’s match.

It shows what happened during a commemorative match seven years ago.

The players involved were——.

“?! This is, father’s?!”

Ai takes the copy from me, devouring it with her eyes the instant she saw who was written in the player slot.

The first was *Yashajin* with a second name being *Tsukimitsu*.

“Yes! And guess what, I was there! I saw the match closer than anyone!!”

My name was written pretty far away from the players—I point to the upper left corner where the recordkeeper signs their name.

Recordkeeper 6-*kyu* Yaichi Kuzuryu

That’s my name all right, in my handwriting too.

At that time, I had just joined the Sub League. I would’ve been right about Ai’s age 9 years old or thereabouts. My memories of those days are pretty much gone But that was my first time being a recordkeeper, so there are a few traces left.

“This record reminded me of a few things. Like seeing how your father played against the chairman and what was said during the review session.”

“.....!!”

Ai’s whole body suddenly froze.

As much as I hate talking to her about deceased family members, this needs to be said.

“This is what your father said to the chairman: *Once my daughter grows up, and if she wants to be a Shogi player, please take her as your apprentice.*”

That’s why the chairman was so invested in her, because that conversation happened.

“So what I just did was really out of line, and probably caused you a lot of trouble. Of course, if you want chairman to be your Master, then I’ll respect that. But, I——.”

“Stop right there!”

She snaps at me, cutting me off.

“..... Here.”

“Huh? What’s this? *Shogi Weekly*?”

The one and only weekly Shogi magazine in the world that goes on sale every Wednesday. Ai pushes it in front of my face.

“This one’s pretty dated, isn’t it? Say what?! Th-This is from——!!”

“My father and the chairman’s commemorative match The same game as that match record.”

Ai’s explanation sends a shock through my system.

But there was an even bigger shock—in what the article said happened after the match analysis.

“Potential to Surpass the Meijin”

This is what was written after that header.

It looked as though the review session would end with the amateur Meijin, Mr. Yashajin, simply not being good enough to win the match.

However, the recordkeeper pointed out a fact that both players had missed once the review session came to end. His words turned everything on its head.

“Young Mr. Kuzuryu said the amateur Meijin had an opportunity for checkmate.”

Who would’ve thought the boy, only nine years old, would be the one to draw that conclusion.

He was the recordkeeper, Yaichi Kuzuryu 6-*kyu*.

The boy discovered a chance to put Seichi Tsukimitsu’s King in

checkmate during the match's 213th turn.

Tsukimitsu-*meijin* didn't look convinced at first, but once Kuzuryu 6-*kyu* began to explain, it all became clear. He said nothing.

Mr. Yashajin seemed absolutely stunned by the revelation. "I don't believe it," he repeated over and over, looking back and forth between the boy and the board.

"That settles it, I could never become a professional. Even a young member of the Sub League saw a checkmate that I had no clue was there," said Mr. Yashajin, a look of resigned acceptance on his face.

Then he turned to the young boy sitting beside him and said, "However, should my little girl say she wants to be a professional Shogi player when she gets older I would like you, Mr. Kuzuryu, to become her Master."

The boy could only shyly nod in response to the amateur Meijin's words.

"....."

There were two pictures included with the article: one of the players and one of me, exactly the same size.

I don't remember any of this, by the way.

"Ever since that day, father always said to me : *One day, you'll be Mr. Kuzuryu's apprentice.*"

Ai strung words together little by little.

Her eyes focused on the article on the floor in front of me.

"So that's why even before I knew left from right, I thought that *becoming Mr. Kuzuryu's apprentice* was going to happen as naturally as the sun rising in the

east But that *Mr. Kuzuryu* didn't recall a single word."

"..... I'm so sorry"

At long last, I understand why Ai was so picky about who she would let teach her how to play Shogi. The real reason.

Because I had been chosen from the start.

But I never figured out what she was trying to do, even completely forgetting the promise I made with her father That explains why she was in such a bad mood that day, she was probably angry at me I thought that was the case, but this explains a lot. Yep.

"Young Mr. Kuzuryu is amazing! Father said it every chance he had."

Ai started speaking again, a lonesome smile on her lips.

"He was elated whenever your rank increased. He'd say things like: Mr. Kuzuryu is already 3-dan! He'll be a professional any day now! and Only in junior high school and playing against the best? Mr. Kuzuryu is truly amazing! or Let's go ask him to take you as his apprentice as soon as he officially becomes a professional!—But he died before that happened"

"....."

"I have no idea how, but he got a hold of Sub League match records and would play through them with me. It must've been his favorite thing in the whole world. He would take the opponent's side, and I would play as you. Mother would read out each move We were always around the Shogi board, the whole family"

"Match records"?

Normally, Sub League match records get thrown away.

However, the Kansai Shogi Association will post particularly good matches from the Sub League on the homepage, so everyone has a chance to be on there if they have a good day.

Quite a few of my matches were chosen to be uploaded, so the front office sent someone to record all of my matches. That's probably how Ai's father got his hands on them.

As the amateur Meijin, I wouldn't be surprised if he knew a few staff members and recordkeepers personally

Nah.

Would it be too much of a stretch to think the chairman gave them to him himself? My gut says so, and I'm pretty sure that's how it went—meaning that the chairman intended for me to take Ai as an apprentice from the start.

What's more, he didn't just order me to *take her*, but set things up so that I would want her while testing me to make sure I was worthy the whole time.

That's why he put me in check so many times despite reading his own defeat.

"..... Shouldn't expect anything less from the Eternal Meijin. Talk about perspective"

In the end, I was just dancing in the palm of that god's hand. From start to finish.

"Okay, I see now. You played through my matches. No wonder"

"I-I didn't do it because I wanted to?! Father and mother were just so happy that I went along with it I picked up some strange habits, thanks to you!"

"Sorry"

I know that my playing style is off the deep end. Sorry about that

But now it all makes sense.

Why Ai can play the Move-Loss Bishop Exchange.

Why I can relate to her playing style so well.

Why I couldn't just write her off as some kid, there was a reason.

"So? Whose apprentice am I going to be?"

"Who do you want as your Master?"

"Either of you is fine with me. Master and apprentice isn't that big of a deal in the Shogi world, right? It's just a piece of paper. As long as there's a name there, I don't care who it is."

"....."

"Well, I bet it's easier that way. At the end of the day, everyone is an enemy."

Shogi is a battle, plain and simple.

Once two people sit across the board from each other, one becomes the winner while the other becomes the loser.

As long as you live in this world, as long as you aim to stand at the top, leaving your mark on others is the only way to prove your existence.

"Thinking about it that way, it might be better to stick with the chairman after all. If I became your apprentice, I'd always be going against your other apprentice in the Practice League, right? I don't really care one way or the other, but people would make such a big deal out of it and that would be a pain."

Just as she said, all of us are destined to fight against each other and inflict many marks.

But—that's not all there is to it.

Sure, we'd be enemies but, we'd build the same No, we'd build stronger bonds because of it.

I want to teach her that.

“Ai.”

It finally came to me in that moment.

I finally figured out why I had become so attached to her.

Back when I refused to take Charlette as an apprentice, I used talent level as the reason—if you’re not good enough, you could never survive in this world.

But hypothetically, even if Ai wasn’t as talented as she is, I would probably still want to take her as an apprentice.

It has nothing to do with a promise in the past.

Or anything to do with how she plays.

Talent, not at all.

I wanted to wipe away the tears of her crying heart with my Rook.

I wanted to draw a rainbow with my Bishop to cheer up Ai’s dreary spirit.

I wanted to teach her. Teach her how to become happy using Shogi. That’s what her parents were really trying to show her.

“Ai. Would you——.”

I fix my posture and straighten my kimono as I make a proposal to the young girl in front of me.

“Would you become a member of my Shogi family?”

“Fam ily?”

“Yes.”

I can’t bring the parents she lost back to life.

Those bonds she had are gone forever.

But I can give her new ones.

Master Kiyotaki, Big Sis, Keika, Ai By welcoming her into my Shogi family, I can give her a new family tree.

Other people might think I'm just playing house.

It might be next to impossible to get along at first.

But, with a Shogi board between us, I'm sure we can understand each other. I saw it happen during that match at the Practice League. Shogi has that power.

Just as Ai said, the Shogi master/apprentice relationship only exists on paper.

People only write their names on the paperwork because the rules require it. There are some who never talk, let alone play a game against each other.

However.

"I want you—Ai Yashajin, to join my family as an apprentice. Not just an apprentice in name, but a real apprentice who I can laugh with when times are good and support when the going gets tough."

Then, one day, she'll take off those grieving clothes and happily twirl a skirt—I want to be with her every step of the way, I'm certain of it.

"..... you'll be Mr. Kuzuryu's"

Ai clenches her hands together in front of that little chest, looking lost and a little frightened.

This isn't the arrogant little princess, nor is it the flawless Shogi prodigy.

Just a trembling little girl, remembering what she's lost and the heartache that came with it.

I take her hand and say.

“Sign with me. I’ll give you a good life I promise.”

🏠 EPILOGUE

“NOOO!!”

Master’s voice echoes through the neighborhood late at night.

“Ai’s gonna stay ‘ere forever, with MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!”

I’ve been having Ai stay at Master’s house whenever I’m expecting a match to run late into the night, but since she’s been living here after running away from my apartment, saying goodbye must be much harder this time around. He’s clinging to my leg.

“Yer a monster! Yer not human at all!!”

“I’m the Ryuo, what of it?”

“UggHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

I leave Master face down, bawling in the middle of the hallway and head toward the back of the house.

“That’s something else. Has he been like this whole time?”

“He’s doting over her more than an actual granddaughter at this point,” says Keika with a grimace as we walk together.

Not only does Ai always try her best and she’s really cute, plus add in that she’s a Shogi prodigy and she’s the absolute ideal grandchild for any Shogi player. *Doting* on her isn’t the right word. No one alive wouldn’t dote on Ai Hinatsuru.

Since that’s obvious, I’ll move on.

“..... Do you think Master knew? About Ai Yashajin and her father And that I was the recordkeeper for that match——.”

“I’m pretty sure Seiich No, Mr. Tsukimitsu told him about it.”

Keika was about to call the chairman, the same age as Master, by his first name but corrected herself. Since she was late in joining the Shogi world, she probably thought of him as an uncle or maybe like an older brother for years. The chairman looks young for his age, too.

“Apparently he asked my father if he thought you could take on another apprentice. I didn’t find out about it until recently though. Articles from back then were scrapped long ago, so I told Ai myself.”

“I see. All right, thanks Keika.”

I didn’t say it, but I’m also grateful to Master. He’s been watching out for me all this time But, I *am* taking Ai home with me!

I go to the stairs, toward the kid’s room on the second floor—the room that Big Sis and I once shared and Ai is now using.

But, just as I step onto the first stair, something grabs my shoulder.

“..... Seriously, Master. This is getting ridiculous.”

I turn.

“I’m not mad.”

Big Sis was standing there, dressed in a full kimono and smiling ear to ear.

..... Nah. Not quite.

There’s something about that smile that makes me want to put some distance between us.

“B-Big Sis? A-Aren’t you supposed to be in Kanagawa Prefecture today? What about your title match at Jinya?”

“I defended it.”

Those words came flying out of her even though it’s 11 o’clock at night right now.

Normally, there’s a lot to do after successfully defending a title. Between the

press conferences, victory parties and whatnot, people would spend the night considering how far it is between there and here. They'd change out of their kimono at the very least.

She must've raced out of the arena and hopped right on the bullet train home like she did after the first match.

Honestly, I'm worried about Ryou Tsukiyomizaka's state of mind after getting destroyed in three consecutive matches on such a big stage. There's nothing more embarrassing than losing like that. Well, it's official: Naniwa's Snow White maintains a perfect 50-0 against Women's League professionals. She's a seven-season titleholder. What a monster

And that monster of the Shogi world is glaring up at me with a huge smile on her face. Scary.

"I'm not mad, so tell me. Yaichi, did you take another apprentice?"

"..... Yes."

"A girl?"

"Yes."

"In elementary school?"

"Of course."

"Drop dead!!"

Big Sis smacks me across the forehead with her fan as she spits out those words. Turning her back on me, she stomps her way to a different part of the house. She sure looks mad to me

Keika, who saw the whole thing, looks up at me and slumps her shoulders.

"Ginko, why don't you change out of that kimono? There's a tasty surprise waiting for you in the *tatami* room. I made sure to get some of your favorite Fruit Overload☆Milk Crêpes from Shu Hatakeyama, okay? Let's have some,"

said Keika as she followed Big Sis in an attempt to console her.

“Ouch Damn. Why’s Big Sis already back here anyway? Actually I’d like to know who blabbed to her. Or was it the Internet? The Internet again?”

I massage the point of impact on my head where the fan struck and make another attempt to go up the stairs. This time, I made it to the second-floor.

I come to a stop in front of the sliding door to the kid’s room and say, “Ai. You awake?”

No answer.

I slide the door open as slowly and quietly as I can——.

“..... Zzz Zzz”

My tiny apprentice was making the tiniest snoozing sounds.

She fell asleep holding a large Shogi board. There’s even a piece clutched in her little hand.

She must’ve been sitting here, waiting for me the whole night. Her competitive fire has to be stoked. Those tiny lips of hers quiver as a few words start coming out.

“..... Master Shogi”

“I won.”

I step lightly on my way over to her and whisper.

“Let’s play Shogi, just as promised. Nineteen No. More, much more.”

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of matches.

Let’s play Shogi. Let’s play more than anyone else.

“..... Ai will always be Master’s number one”

I gently wrap my first apprentice in a comfy blanket, lift her up and carry her all the way back to my place.

Back to our place.

“Hello? No going to sleep.”

“Ngh? Ah, sorry. My bad, my bad.”

Two days later.

I sat across the board from my *second* apprentice.

We’re in the association’s second-floor classroom. We went to the front office to make *corrections* to Ai’s Practice League registration paperwork and then came here to do a lesson right afterward. Akira is playing against an elementary school student a few tables away.

Moving pieces across the board, I explain to Ai why I’m exhausted.

It was all to make sure I could take her as an apprentice.

“..... So, yeah, I didn’t get much sleep at all. A full day of Shogi after one of the biggest matches of my life, can you blame me?”

“Humph. How pitiful.”

Ai looks up from the board, swishing her long black hair over her shoulder like a glossy flap of a bird’s wing.

“Needing an apprentice’s permission to take on another apprentice? Who’s the Master? Aren’t you ashamed as a professional? You’re a titleholder, but you need to bow to your apprentice? Isn’t that pathetic?”

“Disgraceful, yep”

“Who even cares who is number one? All it takes is a game of Shogi to make that clear anyway.”

“Indeed. That’s the right answer for any Shogi player.”

“So?”

“Huh?”

“Who is it?”

Say what?!

Just a second ago Didn't she say she didn't care who was number one?

“D-Don't take that the wrong way?! I-I'm asking which one of us is better at Shogi?! I'm not asking which one of us you like more, got it?!”

“I know! I-I know that!!”

“..... Not that it matters.”

Ai turns away with an irritated *humph*.

“I won't be calling you *Master*.” Cheeks red with anger, she then says, “I'm only here with you because the rules require it—it's what my parents wanted, so I had no choice but to become your apprentice. I never wanted it, not even the tiniest bit. So, so!”

Sounding a lot like the bratty girl dressed in black when we first met, but wearing a slightly more charming smile than that day, Ai turns to me and says:

“Don't get the wrong idea———Yaichi-*sensei*!”



IN PLACE OF THE AFTERWARD: PASSING BY THE PROFESSIONALS

While I think I'm in the minority when it comes to novel authors, I spend a great deal of time researching while in the process of writing my books.

I lost count of how many times I visited the main setting of the story, the Kansai Shogi Association, as well as the Kanto Association in Tokyo and the surrounding areas. I've been in the audience for Title Matches, review session seminars and participated in Shogi festivals along with other attendees. Money for this research comes out of my own pocket, so I can't go all that far

But when I go, I meet Shogi professionals and Women's League professionals all the time.

Meet—might not be the best word, as I'm just an ordinary visitor and disturbing them during what amounts to their break time wouldn't be right. I never struck up a conversation with any of them.

I just *passed by* them.

I still remember working up the courage to go inside the Kansai Shogi Association for the first time when I had to stop myself from approaching a group that came out from inside.

Funae-sensei was at the front of the group, closely followed by Inaba-sensei and I believe Miyamoto-sensei was with them as well, but the three professionals were making a beeline for the front door. They seemed to be on their way to lunch. I knew it was rude of me, but I couldn't pass up this opportunity. I watched them go into a local restaurant. There are many different places to eat around Fukushima Station, but very few have a *mom and pop* at-home feel. "Oh, so that's where they go, " I thought to myself after obtaining this valuable tidbit.

I've also encountered professionals at the association's first-floor restaurant *Eleven*.

I sat down at the U-shaped counter, ordered an Extraordinary Pork Beauty and started looking around, thinking of the best ways to describe this place when I happened to spot a group of four professionals, two men and two women, walking in the front door. At that time, they were customers just like me and I'm not the kind of person to barge in on their private time.

Eleven has many tables as well, but most of them were designed for two people. I was intrigued to see what they would do because I was planning a four-person table scene for Book 1. In the end, they went to the back corner and moved two tables together.

I was also interested to see what kind of food professionals order. In Book 1, Ai orders butter rice. That scene was directly inspired by what I saw that day.

Tokyo is not the main setting for the series, but I have walked from Harajuku, through Sendagaya and all the way to Shinjuku. It was around the time that Dengue Fever was in the news because some people contracted it in Yoyogi Park. Wearing long sleeves and doused in bug spray, I set out to find an out-of-the-way place that many professionals often visit: *Miroku Iori*.

It's a soba-noodle restaurant but it looks more like a Japanese-style bar. The menu is huge, and for some reason they sell cups of prepackaged fresh blueberries, calling it "breakfast finger food." That place has a great deal of personality.

I was enjoying a fried chicken lunch set (the one that Maruyama-sensei is famous for ordering with extra chicken), when the master of *fusha*, Itou-sensei came in. The staff called him "Shogi-sensei." He wasn't the only one, I saw several professionals and Women's League players come in after that.

It's a small place and voices carry, so I quickly finished my lunch and left. Honestly, I don't remember the food all that well But I did write "delicious

right off the bone” in my notes.

While some of these encounters happened by chance, there are others that can't be missed. Go to any one of the regional Shogi events and you'll pass by these amazing Shogi professionals quite often around the arena.

Shogi fans from outside the big cities come to these events with sparkles in their eyes, *to think I could ever get this close to the Shogi pros I've only seen in Shogi World and Internet videos*! Each player has their own unique charms.

The one who left the biggest impression on me has to be Toshiaki Kubo-*sensei*.

Fans approached him all over the arena no matter where he was, asking for an autograph or to sign a book. Not only did he oblige, he looked genuinely happy to do so. He even shook their hands, that smile still on his face. Honestly, he looked even happier than the fans themselves. It was a warm, uplifting sight.

I had a chance to see the one and only Hifumin, aka Hifumi Katou-*sensei*, in action at the Tokyu Shogi Festival. But what happened after this stage talk review session at a book signing is what left a lasting impression on me. Fans reached out to Katou-*sensei* as he made his way to the signing booth and he gave them all a high five like a pro wrestler heading toward the ring. Even in the middle of signing, he took time to wish a kid who wanted an autograph the best of luck and ruffled the boy's hair. Always smiling, Katou-*sensei* is a fountain of youthful energy.

I also passed by Kazuo Ishida-*sensei*, who is known for being a bit spacey, at the Meijin Title Match held at the Westin Nagoya Castle Hotel not once but twice.

The first time was after I checked in and arrived on the floor where I'd be staying.

The elevator doors opened to reveal Ishida-*sensei* standing there in full traditional attire, including a crest on his *hakama* pants. “Whoa!” I said in

surprise. He must've been just as shocked, because he stumbled backwards with a loud "Hmm?!" I'm very sorry for startling you, sir.

The second time was after the match was over. I was walking around a bread shop next to a place selling souvenirs in the hotel lobby when Ishida-*sensei*, his big day over and back in street clothes, showed up looking famished.

He ordered some bread, but looked puzzled when the clerk asked him to "put them on a tray and bring them to the register." He must not have heard the clerk clearly because he just stood there, eyebrows high on his forehead and a confused expression on his face.

My first instinct was to say, "Use a pair of those tongs and a tray," but I stopped myself once I saw that Ishida-*sensei* figured it out on his own and successfully purchased the bread he wanted.

I stayed at the hotel that night and went to the first-floor lounge for breakfast the next morning.

I picked up a newspaper that said "Moriuchi, Meijin Title Defended," and started reading it with a glass of orange juice in my hand when a rather thin young man took a seat at a nearby table.

It was Masayuki Toyoshima-*sensei*.

Staying overnight as an observer, he looked much more his age with a smartphone in one hand, typing away with his thumb. However, he was quieter and more relaxed than most people his age. No one around us had any idea that this young person in their midst was a professional living in a competitive world.

For some reason, I couldn't help but feel that this young man sitting there eating breakfast and using a smartphone with a remarkably flexible thumb looked like a Shogi player in the middle of a match.

..... And so ends my essay-esque afterword for this book. My story about Mr. K in Book 1 was so well received that I thought I would do another one But it sounded like I was stalking him

This episode (?) took place before I had a basic production schedule in place.

After that, once I had a completed manuscript and could go to these places and confidently say, “This is for research!” I was finally able to talk to people in the Shogi world with no reservations.

I got to do so many things like working with my supervisors for this series, the members of “Saiyuki,” getting tours of the Kansai Shogi Association, attending a Title Match with Kazuki-*sensei* and Kogeta-*sensei* who draw the manga for this story in *Young GanGan* magazine. Actually, it was right around the time a story about Shogi started in *Jump* magazine and I-*sensei* happened to be with us.

“Did you know a Shogi manga started in *Jump*?”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and your *No effort goes unrewarded* story is in there.”

“Seriously?! I’d better pick up a *Jump* on the way home!”

That’s when F-zaki-*sensei*, who was also there, spoke up saying, “I ain’t buyin’ *Jump*! *Young GanGan* all the way!! *Young GanGan*!!” over and over.

As a Shogi fan, that day was pure bliss.

As happy as I was to speak with all the players, I was overjoyed to get an opportunity to talk with the journalists who provide us Shogi fans with articles and pictures. To every single one of you, thank you so much!

When Nozuki-*sensei* came to Aichi Prefecture and the two of us went up to Gifu to watch the Emperor’s Cup Soccer Tournament, I had him wear an FC Gifu

uniform and root for the team along with us the stands. I didn't think there'd be a problem with asking Nozuki-sensei, who usually supports Consadole Sapporo, to do this Because, I mean, not many people come to watch the Emperor's Cup

Nozuki-sensei would like nothing more than to set up a collaboration between Shogi and soccer during his travels around the country, showing up at many different stadiums in the process. Whenever I see pictures of his travels on Twitter, it's easy to forget he's actually a professional Shogi player rather than a journeyman.

Thanks to Nozuki-sensei's introduction, I now have opportunities to speak with soccer journalist and Shogi fan Gou Ishikawa. He has penned several beautiful articles about Shogi and soccer for multiple magazines.

Right now, the Shogi world is expanding by the day.

I work in a very small part of it, but even still, I have had people come up to me and say things like, "You got me interested in Shogi!" and "Shogi's really intense, isn't it!" Receiving comments like that makes everything worthwhile.

Once you finish reading a fantasy novel, no matter how much you'd like to go into that world and explore, it's impossible to do so.

But with Shogi, you can go right away. The Shogi classrooms and Shogi parlors in New World that appeared in this book really do exist and you can play alongside real professionals at the Shogi associations.

There are interesting things to do "after" reading.

Writing that type of novel has always been my dream.

To my supervisors in Saiyuki, my illustrator Shirabii-sensei, my editor, the manga artists Kazuki-sensei and Kogeta-sensei, as well as every single person who has read this book, please allow me to express my gratitude once again. Thank you so very much.

In Book Three, I'll finally get to write a sequence that I've been itching to get on paper since the beginning.

I'll do everything in my power to make the story more intense than ever before, something that will make you laugh and bring you to tears. Please look forward to it.

REVIEW
SESSION



REVIEW SESSION

“I have purchased a car.”

That day, I stuck my head into the Player’s Room only to see *Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui* (such a long name) spacing out in front of one of the computer monitors and that topic came up while we were shooting the breeze.

“Got a license not too long ago. Figure my parents can’t complain if I used my title winnings to purchase it.”

Machi comes from one of Kyoto’s noble families, so she was raised to be a proper “lady.” She says her house is right next to the old Imperial Palace. Personally, I’m jealous that she has a chauffeur who’ll drive her anywhere, but I guess that being a nineteen-year-old girl she wanted the freedom that comes with having her own car.

“I just went and did it!” she says with a beaming smile on her face.

“But you know, most Shogi players don’t drive.”

“Awhh, must be because they only think about Shogi and get into accidents.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay, Machi?”

“Concerning that matter, there should be no problem. I was fine today.”

“So, you drove here, to the association today? Once you’re done, let me have a look.”

“But of course.”

Machi takes out her keychain, shaking it while saying, “Say, Ryuo. Why not come for a drive if you have time to spare tonight?”

“Huh?!”

“There’s a place I’d like to see. It may be morning by the time we get back though.”

“Ah out all night?!”

“Oh, but then again, Ryuo. You live with that young apprentice of yours, yes? You couldn’t possibly be absent for a full night.”

“It-It’s fine! My Master would be more than happy to look after her!!”

“You sure?”

“Yes!! Morning return, so what? Bring it on!!”

Therefore, I dropped Ai off at Master’s house (he was thrilled, Ai not so much) and set off for an all-night driving date with Machi except——.

“..... Why’s Ryou here too?”

“Eh? Got a problem with me bein’ here? Want me to swing open the door and kick you out?”

For some reason, *Women’s King* Ryou Tsukiyomizaka is in the car with us.

“And, while I go’cha here, what was up with that Shogi, eh? Mercilessly takin’ all my pieces like that in a Title Match? For real? The two of you like that? No sense of warrior’s pride or even a human heart? Well?”

“That’s Big Sis, nothing to do with me——.”

“Cut the crap. You two siblings are hoggin’ all the glory. That really pisses me offffffff!!”

Ryou vents her pent-up frustration with a flurry of complaints and one kick after another. Owch!!

“Don’t you see this, Machi?! This girl, she’s dangerous! Far too violent!! Let’s ditch her at the nearest convenience store!!”

“Now, now, both of you. The three of us should be having fun, no?”

Machi just kept driving the small, hybrid car in really high spirits. It’s a cute, orange one.

And right now, I'm sitting next to Ryou in the back seat of said car.

I wanted to ride shotgun, but Machi said she "couldn't focus on driving while someone was next to her." So now I'm back here, trapped in a cage with this wild animal.

"..... But, yeah. Cars make things so much easier. Three people could never fit on a moped."

"You have a car, Ryou?"

"I ain't even got the paperwork. Been drivin' a moped since high school though."

"Well then, you've got that license, don't you?"

"....."

Why aren't you saying anything?

"Huh? You have a license, right Ryou? Y-You're okay, right? A titleholder being picked up for driving without a license would be nothing to laugh at"

"Shut it. I got one now."

Now

"Oh yeah, Kuzu. How's that apprentice thing workin' out for you? Don't tell me you've already called it quits?"

"I took on another one."

"Another one?!"

"Fortunately both of them are going full speed ahead, but they butt heads quite a bit, being my apprentices and all Sure, that really can't be helped considering there aren't many people in Kansai, but it's still hard to watch. But really, Keika has it worse on so many levels"

"Awhh, Keikaaa. She just can't seem to break through that last wall."

“She ain’t half bad, either. Wonder if it’s because she started Shogi so late?”

A dark cloud suddenly moved in.

“We’re here.”

Machi stops the car at some observation point near the top of a mountain.

“Whoa!”

Ryou and I couldn’t hold back our amazement as we got out of the car parked right up against the guard rail.

I can see all of Kyoto’s night skyline from here. It’s amazing.

“Stars above and stars below spreading out as far as the eye can see
Stunning”

“Kyoto at night is nothing to ignore, am I right?”

The three of us look out over the night sky, leaning against the car and drinking the canned coffee we bought at a convenience store on the way up. It almost feels like one of those *glorious youth* moments that Shogi players almost never have.

Ryou says under her breath, “..... Look at all the stars”

“Does it make Shogi boards feel small?”

“Not a bit. Makes ‘em feel even bigger,” Ryou flashes a bold grin in my direction and drinks the last of her coffee after saying that.

While it’s a relief to see that she’s back to her usual self—.

“Just like the stars that reside on Shogi boards.”

Those words sparked an inferno.

“What? Machi, you got a screw loose? Shogi boards don’t have stars.”

“But of course they do.”

“Nada. Not one.”

“I’m telling you, they do. Isn’t that right, Ryuo?”

“Huh?! You’re asking me?!”

“They have stars, yes?”

“No—they—do—not. Have you totally lost it? How many years have you been playing now? Ain’t that right, Kuzu? Boards don’t have stars.”

“Huh? Ummm I wonder?”

Crap. I really can’t remember.

Goh boards have stars (black dots), that much I’m sure. They’re there for a reason.

But there’d be no point for a star on Shogi boards right? I think

“Either way, you guys. It doesn’t really matter either way, does it? We can just check a board once we get home so——.”

“Oh, but it does. *O-Ryou*, would you be willing to bet your winnings from the Women’s King match? This car says that I’m right.”

“Say what?!”

Ryou and I scream at the same time.

Machi looks just as aloof as ever as she escalates the situation.

“I’ve got the key right here. Should you win, *O-Ryou*, the car is yours. Drive it on home if you wish. Ryuo and I shall walk.”

Me, walk?! All the way back to Osaka?!

“Hey Machi, hold up. I ain’t got a license or nothin’. And——.”

“What’s this? Are you running away? You’re absolutely sure there are no stars on a Shogi board, yes? Then this is your chance for a free car, is it not? Is the Women’s King so much of a coward that she won’t claim a free piece that’s

there for the taking? Well? Weeeell?”

“Then why don’t I just take it off your hands, eeeeeehhh!!?”

Ryou pulls out her wallet, takes out a bank card and slaps it down on the hood of the car. Then she turns to me and says, “Oi, Kuzu. Get Ginko on the phone.”

“Seriously?! She went to sleep hours ago! Big Sis always turns in early!!”

“Exactly. She cuddles a board like a teddy bear in bed, right? That’s perfect.”

“I-I can’t deny that sometimes she falls asleep while playing through a match record and spends the night next to a board, but this is a horrible idea! She’ll kill me!! She hates getting woken up!!”

“So, either get put six feet under by me an’ Machi here or let Ginko do the honors later. What’ll it be?”

“Ryuo, would you prefer to fall from this cliff? Or perhaps be run over by a car? Then again, being rammed by said car over that cliff would be better?”

They’re serious. Both of them, they’re actually serious.

“D Don’t say I didn’t warn you, got it?”

Preparing myself for the worst, I take out my smartphone and start dialing with trembling fingers.

It took about twenty calls but——.

“..... What?”

“Ah! S-S-S-S-So sorry to call you so late at night! You were sleeping weren’t you?”

“..... Like I said, what?”

Her voice, it’s terrifying.

“U, umm about Shogi boards, and if they have stars on them are not Could you check for me?”

“.....Why would you ask me that?”

“Y-You see, Machi and I drove out to look at the stars Ah! Ryou is here too! And the two of them got into an argument over whether Shogi boards have stars or not

“.....”

“Um, Big Sis? Are there stars

“Don’t know. Are there not?”

Beep. Buzz buzz

“Um I didn’t get a clear answer, but Big Sis says, *Are there not?*

“Hah!!”

In that moment, Ryou looks triumphantly into the starry night sky and says,
“Looks like her days on top are over!”

I’m not sure if it’s Big Sis’s era of dominance or Ryou’s bank card that’s coming to an end

It’d be better for you to see the answer with your own eyes.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Book 2 has gone on sale. Thank you so much for your support. The match that pulled at my heartstrings the most appears in the book. While it's not between professionals, I get excited every time I see that Shogi match. Nothing would make me happier than if you got just as into it!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I had a mixture of red and black in mind when I drew the rival that appears in Book 2, Ai Yashajin. Each of the Grade School Practice Group girls are drawn with their own unique color pallets. Ai Hinatsuru, for example, is blue and white. Yaichi has a lot on his mind, so I tend to think in shades of gray for him. A great deal of trial and error goes into each character, but I enjoy drawing every one of them.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 2

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 2

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